Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec / Paweł Piszczatowski (eds.)

Re-Thinking Agency

Non-Anthropocentric Approaches



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Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec and Paweł Piszczatowski

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With 3 figures

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Contents

Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec / Paweł Piszczatowski
Expanding Horizons: Some Non-Anthropocentric Views of Agency. An Introduction 9

I. Agential Realism

Mai Ibrahim
Exploring Tahrir Square as an Intra-active Hybrid Space 21

Katarzyna Ferworn-Horawa
Aisthesis in Non/anthropocentric Perspective: The Consequences of Agential Realism for the Categories of Human and Nonhuman in Aesthetic Research 35

Mettin Jacob
Intra-action as a Curious Practice: Emerging Response-abilities in Monica Gagliano's *Thus Spoke the Plant* 51

Patryk Szaj
A Bad Patch of Agrilogistics: *Polysaccharides* [*Cukry złożone*] by Szymon Szwarc 61

Beate Sommerfeld
Diffracted landscapes, decentered agencies – photography as a tool of 'mattering' in the novels of Esther Kinsky, Franz Friedrich and Michel Houellebecq 77

II. Non-Human Animal Agency

Justyna Schollenberger
Neighbours in a pot – familiar and weird agency of Darwin's worms . . . 93

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Justyna Włodarczyk
Shaping Non-Human Agency: Canine Eugenics and Leon Fradley Whitney's Juvenile Fiction 111

Jack Harrison
Musicking with the Enemy: Mosquito Agency, Control, and Buzzing on Film 135

Emma Devlin
Animal Autobiography and Rajesh Parameswaran's "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" 155

Sutirtho Roy
The Boy and his Companion Animal: A Post-anthropocentric Reading of Agency in *Flora and Ulysses*, *Free Willy* and *How to Train Your Dragon* Trilogy 167

Concepción Cortés Zulueta
Is that a car alarm? Or a bird? Representing and thinking birds' mimicry as a co-constituted living archive 191

Bogdan Mihai Florea
Continuing Chekhov's Project for a Non-human Theatre in *The Seagull* 209

III. New Subjectivity

Katarzyna Moszczyńska-Dürst
Life lines: mourning, agency and subjectivity in Argentine auto(bio)graphical novels 227

Isabella Schlehaider
"Drops of Experience, complex and interdependent": Re-Thinking Subjectivity and Agency with Alfred North Whitehead 245

Karolina Kumor / Kamil Seruga
Migrant Women in the Contemporary Spanish Theater. In Search of Agency and a New Subjectivity 257

Patrycja Pichnicka-Trivedi
Posthuman (?) agency and Vampire Narrative(s) 271

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IV. Rereading and Deconstracting

Alena Heinritz
Promethea: Post-Promethean Intra-Active Agency and the Medial Affordances of the Comic 303

Christian Struck
Local Ecology of Textual Marks: Reading Arno Schmidt at the Threshold of the Human 317

Aránzazu Calderón Puerta
Artificial corporealities for a posthuman future: deconstructing romantic love 329

Zofia Moros-Pałys / Maciej Laskowski
Cultural heritage of the German city of Wrocław (Breslau) in Marek Krajewski's crime novels in a posthumanist perspective 347

Subhadeep Paul / Saikat Chakraborty
Ventriloquism re-appraised: Interrogating non-human agency through Satyajit Ray's short story "Bhuto" 365

V. Decolonializing Bodies

Irene Brunotti / Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi
matterphorics of words and rubble 379

Ludovica D'Alessandro
Material and Discursive Reproduction of Gender/Sex in Irritable Bowel Syndrome 393

Branislava Vičar / Vesna Liponik
The Anthropocene Poetics of Uroš Prah: Trans-corporeal Subjectivity and Marginal Places 403

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Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec / Paweł Piszczatowski
(University of Warsaw)

Expanding Horizons: Some Non-Anthropocentric Views of Agency. An Introduction

The concept of agency has traditionally been perceived as a domain reserved exclusively for human ability to act and, as Jeffrey Scott Marchand argues, "has long been associated with notions of intentionality, rationality and voice; in short, agency has traditionally been intricately tied to extremely limited notions of subjectivity and power […]."[1] Action and agency were therefore seen as components of a metaphysically and religiously founded anthropocentric and patriarchal order, and thus formed the basis for the imperial understanding of colonial power, which cemented the one-dimensional determination of active impact and passive subordination. In many cases, this restrictive understanding of agency contributed to the creation of systems of oppression. We can detect echoes of the above dichotomy in gender-based oppression, the class structure of society, and the machinations of world politics. At the latest since the establishment of the Cartesian view of nature, agency has also been restricted to human beings who – as thinking subjects – have gained absolute power of influence over the natural world, which has been degraded to a collection of objects, without any potential for action and agency.

This situation began to change only recently, when the foundations of phallogocentric patriarchy were called into question in the course of ongoing decolonization and emancipation of the oppressed in global politics and social discourses, based on factors such as race, gender identity, or ethnicity. Accelerating awareness of the catastrophic consequences of human predatory exploitation of the natural environment and increasing occurrence of worldwide natural disasters force a rethinking of epistemological and ethical subject-object models and the one-dimensional, anthropocentrically oriented conception of agency.

When analyzing changing discursive practices in this area, let us start with Walter Johnson's seminal essay "On Agency," which offers a critical examination

1 Jeffrey Scott Marchand, "Non-Human Agency," in *The Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 292–3.

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of agency within the context of slavery in the United States. Johnson challenges traditional narratives that portray enslaved people as passive victims, arguing instead that they found various ways to exercise agency in order to resist oppression and assert their humanity. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexities of agency within the institution of slavery, acknowledging that while enslaved individuals often had limited options, they still found ways to exert control over their lives and challenge the system of bondage. Johnson's argument is aimed at undoing "the imposed isomorphism of 'humanity', 'agency', and 'resistance.'"[2] In doing so, Johnson argues against viewing agency as a condition of humanity. If this were the case, denying slaves agency (expressed in resistance) would be tantamount to their dehumanization. Johnson argues that traditional notions of agency as a capacity to act, which emphasize individual autonomy and resistance, fail to fully capture the reality of enslaved people's lives. Instead, he suggests that agency must be understood within the broader framework of power relations and structural constraints in their historical dynamics. Johnson's findings liberate agency from the bonds of anthropology entangled in racist colonialism and constitute a significant breakthrough, marking a noteworthy paradigm shift and paving the way for the development of posthumanist tendencies.

At their core, posthumanist concepts of agency challenge anthropocentric perspectives by acknowledging the agency of non-human actants. In this framework, agency is not solely attributed to human actors but is distributed across a multitude of entities, including nonhuman animals, technological artifacts, ecological systems, and inanimate objects. These non-human actors are seen as active participants in shaping social, political, and cultural dynamics. Jane Bennett speaks directly about "the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies," which she sees as "the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[3] One key aspect of this concept of agency is its emphasis on relationality and interdependence. Rather than viewing agency as an individual attribute, it is understood as a product of relational interactions within dynamic assemblages of humans and non-humans. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate entities and recognizes that agency emerges through networks of relationships and inter/intra-actions between them. Moreover, posthumanism challenges binary distinctions between subject and object, human and

2 Walter Johnson, "On Agency," in *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, Special Issue (Autumn, 2003): 116.

3 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

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non-human, nature and culture suggesting that both humans and non-humans can exert influence and effect change. As Rosi Braidotti writes, referring to Dipesh Chakrabarty's groundbreaking theories on climate history, his "conceptual shift towards 'Deep History'"

> is an interdisciplinary combination of geological and socio-economic history that focuses both on the planetary or earth factors and on the cultural changes that have jointly created humanity over hundreds of thousands of years. It combines theories of historical subjectivity with 'species thinking'. This is, in my eyes, a post-anthropocentric configuration of knowledge that grants the earth the same role and agency as the human subjects that inhabit it.[4]

In recent decades, the redefinition of the onto-epistemological relationship between subject and object has manifested in various forms. One of them is Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a philosophical framework that challenges traditional human-centric views of reality, emphasizing the agency and significance of non-human entities. The works of Graham Harman, especially his books *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) and *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018), have been particularly influential in shaping the discourse around OOO. Harman's concept emphasizes the autonomy of objects as well as the importance of understanding objects on their own terms rather than solely through human perception.

One of the key concepts in OOO is the idea of 'flat ontology', which rejects hierarchical distinctions between objects based on their scale or complexity. In a flat ontology, all objects are considered equal in their ontological status, whether they are atoms, organisms, or galaxies. OOO, therefore, can be described using the words of Manuel DeLanda as "referring to an ontology that *initially* treats all objects in the same way, rather than assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies."[5] In a post-anthropocentric context, it seems to be significant primarily as an act of dehierarchization and undermining of human exceptionalism.

Object-Oriented Ontology has significantly influenced many ecological thinkers, such as the already mentioned Jane Bennett or Timothy Morton.

Bennett's concept of the agency of things results from the assumptions of 'vital materialism', which posits that all matter possesses a certain degree of vitality or agency. Referring to the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Bennett emphasizes the notion of assemblages, which

> are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent

4 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 160.

5 Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin UK, 2018), 38.

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> presence of energies that confound them from within. […] Assemblages are not governed by any central head […]. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone.[6]

For Bennett, an example of an "agentic assemblage" is the electrical power grid, "a material cluster of charged parts that have indeed affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce distinctive effects."[7] Such assemblages are hybrid structures including "humans and their (social, legal, linguistic) constructions" and "some very active and powerful nonhumans: electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields."[8] Thinking in terms of assemblage also changes the perception of human corporeality, as the human body in its "vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is 'a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria […].'"[9]

The example of the electrical power grid mentioned by Jane Bennett is characteristic of a whole range of approaches to agential interdependency, emphasizing the networked, rhizomatic, and entangled nature of more-than-human agencies.

One such approach is Timothy Morton's concept of the "mesh" which describes the interconnectedness of both human and non-human beings in a complex web of relationships. In Morton's view, this mesh is not solely composed of tangible entities but also includes intangible forces and phenomena, such as ideologies, emotions, and technologies. This interconnectedness implies a fundamental entanglement between humans and the environment, blurring the boundaries between self and other. In the structure of the mesh, a human being is an element of a complex system of symbiotic relationships encompassing multispecies biosystems. Morton, without hiding the subtle resonances with Deleuze and Guattari, states:

> Lichen is two life forms interacting – a fungus and a bacterium or a fungus and an alga. Seeds and pollen have birds and bees to circulate them. Animal and fungal cells include mitochondria, energy cells (organelles) that are evolved bacteria taking refuge from a (for them) toxically oxygenated world. Plants are green (the color of Nature) because they contain chloroplasts, derived from the cyanobacteria. Mitochondria and chloroplasts have their own DNA and perform their own asexual reproduction. Our stomachs contain benign bacteria and harmless amoebae. […] The first "metazoan" was a colony

6 Bennett, 24.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid. 112.

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> of flagellate protozoa […]. Most of the root hairs of plants are tiny fungi, the mycorrhizae. At the viral level, there are all kinds of replicating entities: "plasmids, episomes, insertion sequences, plasmons, virions, transposons, replicons, viruses." And ultimately, as Richard Dawkins puts it, "we are all symbiotic colonies of genes." Even DNA is subject to symbiosis, coevolution, parasitism, conflict, and cooperation. We consist of organs without bodies, like the grin of the Cheshire cat.[10]

In this biomaterial view, agency emerges from the collective, evolutionarily determined interactions and is distributed across the entire meshwork, manifesting in emergent phenomena and feedback loops that shape the trajectory of ecological systems.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed in the late twentieth century primarily by sociologists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, among others, has proven to be a highly influential model for describing agency as a function of network connections. At the core of ANT is the idea that social phenomena emerge from the interactions between various actors or "actants," each possessing agency and capable of influencing the network in which they are embedded. Latour describes actants in a way far from anthropocentric hierarchization as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies *no* special motivation of *human individual* actors, nor of humans in general."[11] A network, on the other hand, is a nexus of dynamic and heterogeneous interactions of actants conceptualized as socio-technical configurations that emerge through processes of association and translation. Networks in ANT are characterized by their rhizomatic[12] and fluid nature, as they are constantly being enacted and reconfigured through ongoing translations. In this context, translation – a term adapted for ANT by Michel Callon[13] – refers to the material-semiotic transformation of meanings, interests, and alliances among heterogeneous entities (both human and non-human) within networks, "a connection that transports […] transformations […], a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting."[14] The network is therefore subject to processes of constant destabilization, and all agency within it is the

10 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2010), 33–34.

11 Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47 (4) (1996): 373.

12 Latour sometimes refers to ANT as "actant-rhyzome ontology" [Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social, An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 20], which, on the one hand, indicates the affinity of his understanding of "network" with the concept of the rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari, and on the other hand, it opens the entire theory to a perspective that goes beyond the social context.

13 Cf. Michel Callon, "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay," *The Sociological Review* 32 (1) (1984): 196–233.

14 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 119.

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result of negotiating conditions and benefits assuming an inevitable and surprising contingency of (re)configurations.

Although the above-mentioned concepts of agency, especially ANT, emphasize the relational dynamics of networked interconnectedness of heterogeneous entities, they assume a given reality of objects, often questioning their essential distinguishability from epistemic subjects. Theorizing in the paradigms of quantum physics, Karen Barad goes a step further in their thinking, arguing – based on their theory of 'agential realism' – that material things do not 'pre-exist' in an objective way. Karen Barad's 'agential realism' assumes that material objects become real only as entangled agencies and are inseparable from the agential processuality of world-making. This scenario results from the quantum perspective, which emphasizes the inseparability of the observer and the observed, as well as the active role of both in the construction of reality. In Barad's agential realist interpretation of quantum physics, reality is not seen as something pre-existing or independent of observation but is instead understood as emerging through the entanglement of the observer and the observed, the object and the subject, the human and the nonhuman. Therefore, Karen Barad replaces the commonly used concept of interaction as the multi-aspect interconnectedness of separate, yet related entities with their own term 'intra-action' denoting the material performativity of becoming/being/(un)doing:

> The neologism "intra-action" signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.*[15]

The connectedness of intra-acting agencies in Barad's theory has the form of entanglement, which should also be understood in light of the concepts of theoretical physics where two or more particles become deeply correlated with each other, to the extent that the state of one particle cannot be described independently of the state of the other(s) regardless of the spatial separation between them, and changes to one particle's state instantaneously affect the state of the other(s). There are also many other quantum concepts in Barad's thinking. The ones worth mentioning here because of their bearing on Barad's ideas about agency are, first of all, superposition and diffraction, which – following Donna

15 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

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Haraway[16] – become for Barad the basic method of analyzing discursive practices within which "matter comes to matter":[17]

> My approach is to diffractively read these important insights from natural and social theories through one another in an effort to produce an account of naturalcultural practices and agencies that attends to the production of objects and subjects, the materialization of human and nonhuman bodies, and the entanglement of material relations (including those that get named social, political, economic, natural, cultural, technological, and scientific, rather than presuming separate factors and domains of operation from the outset).[18]

Karen Barad uses the radical changes that quantum theory has initiated in the understanding of physical phenomena to critically look at socio-political processes, which seems to be a gesture that is both influential and controversial.[19] However, their concept of agential realism follows a subversive dynamic of ongoing reconfiguration, and the world-becoming in the performative process of intra-activity renders useless the traditional dualistic dichotomies between human and non-human, culture and nature, matter and the social world. Barad writes that "[i]n an agential realist account, agency is cut loose from its tradi-

16 Cf. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

17 Cf. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3), (2003): 801–31.

18 Barad, *Meeting the Universe…*, 232–33.

19 Karen Barad's theory has received significant attention, especially in New Materialism. One can mention here the concept of trans-corporeality by Stacy Alaimo, who – referring directly to Barad – states that "thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world – and, at the same time, acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies – allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which 'human' and 'environment' can by no means be considered as separate." Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures, Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2. Regarding the criticism of Karen Barad's agential realist interpretation of quantum physics, especially in the aspect of macroscale sociopolitical and ethical connotations, cf. Thomas Everth, Laura Gurney, "Emergent Realities: Diffracting Barad within a quantum-realist ontology of matter and politics," *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 12 (2022), open access at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13194-022-00476-8#citeas (6.3.2024).

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tional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity."[20]

The fact that we end our review of non-anthropocentric conceptions of agency with a presentation of Karen Barad's theory does not mean that we diminish the importance of other contemporary concepts discussed above. The point is rather that Karen Barad's ideas served as direct inspiration for this book project in a very specific way. Our volume documents the proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches," which took place on February 3–5, 2022 at the Faculty of Modern Languages of the University of Warsaw and was part of the "Non-Anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity" research project. Karen Barad delivered the keynote lecture "What Flashes Up: Errant Wanderings/Wonderings: The Materiality of Imagining, the Imaginings of Materiality" opening the conference and thus giving a specific substantive profile to further explorations.

This is reflected in both the structure and subject matter of the essays presented below. The first group uses – as its title **Agential Realism** suggests – Karen Barad's theory as one of the basic methodological tools for the critical presentation of phenomena in the modern world, combining various perspectives: from political activism to literary representations of the more-than-human world.

The second set of chapters titled **Non-Human Animal Agency** focuses on approaches to agency from the perspective of critical human-animal studies. Individual authors explore both scientific discourses and artistic productions based on the diverse media aesthetics of literature, film, and theater.

The next part of the book (**New Subjectivity**) includes texts dealing with the forms of new identity constructs resulting from the dehierarchization of the spheres of subject and object, or even their fundamental superposition.

The group of five texts with the common title **Rereading and Decontracting** is united by the fact that the authors use topoi strongly entrenched in western culture, and sometimes even archetypal, such as the Promethean myth. The proposed analyses are focused on the reconfiguration of meanings anchored in semiotic inversions and queering of static cultural patterns.

The book closes with three texts focused on the topic of **Decolonizing Bodies.** Decolonization practices seem to be a very current element of the strategy of freeing agential potentials from the oppressive systems of imperial phallogocentrism. They constitute an attempt to restore planetary social balance in a decentralized and heterogeneous system of self-determination and post-colonial justice. The perspective of corporeality closes the circle of embodied agency of posthumanist mattering.

20 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*…., 176.

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As we can easily see from the diversity of topics, the following book documents the multi-aspect nature of contemporary reflection on agency and refers to the multitude of discursive practices that contribute to the posthumanist landscape of reflection on the dependencies and entanglements of the human and non-human world perceived from a planetary perspective. Moreover, not only are the topics of individual parts and chapters diverse, but also the geographical locations of their authors, who represent different countries and academic traditions. We believe that the depiction of the problems discussed in the book, resulting from such decentralization of thinking, enacts a true diffraction pattern within which different points of view overlap and mutually stimulate each other.

As editors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to this project. First of all, we would like to thank our partners co-organizing the conference mentioned above, i. e. Ursula K. Heise from the Department of English of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Evi Zemanek from the Institut für Medienkulturwissenschaft of the University of Freiburg. Our thanks also go to the authorities and the Faculty of Modern Languages of the University of Warsaw, Robert Małecki and Anna Wojtyś, who effectively supported our project. We are glad that this cooperation led to the establishment of the Environmental Humanities Center at the Faculty of Modern Languages, which enables us to continue the initiated research in the future. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Karen Barad for graciously accepting the invitation to participate in the conference and deliver the opening lecture. Additionally, we would like to thank over a hundred conference participants hailing from all over the world – spanning all continents and nearly thirty countries – from Argentina, the United States and Canada, through Ghana and South Africa, numerous European universities, important science centers in India and China, to Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation to each author for their valuable contribution to our book.

This book could not have been published without the participation of many people involved in the editorial work on its individual chapters. Therefore, we would like to thank Justyna Włodarczyk, Justyna Schollenberger, Patrycja Pichnicka-Trivedi, Katarzyna Moszczyńska-Dürst, Karolina Kumor and Aránzazu Calderón Puerta for the fruitful cooperation. Special thanks go to Jack Harrison for proofreading the entire book.

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I. Agential Realism

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Exploring Tahrir Square as an Intra-active Hybrid Space

Abstract
In this paper, I expand on de Souza e Silva's concept of hybrid spaces through the lens of Karen Barad's[1] *agential realism*, which is defined as the inseparability of intra-acting agencies. I use Egypt's Tahrir Square as an example of a place that has emerged through intra-actions of different agencies. I argue that the distinctive nature of hybrid spaces can be conceptualized through intra-actions, or "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies."[1] With that in mind, I investigate Tahrir Square as an intra-active hybrid space where agency is not endowed to individual entities but is coming from the whole: that is, the intertwining of the mobile technology, social media, the Egyptian people, the army, political parties, and the physical place, which are entangled together in what Barad calls *phenomenon.* The Square is materialized as a hybrid space through different intra-actions. Taking intra-actions into account entails giving up the relations of cause and effect, individual agency, and subject-object dichotomies. Perceiving hybrid spaces through intra-action help us think in rhizomatic rather than linear terms.
Keywords: hybrid spaces; intra-actions; agential realism; Tahrir; interactions

Introduction

The use of social media by Egyptian protestors was instrumental in preparing for the Egyptian revolution that mobilized millions of Egyptians. Tahrir Square posed as a catalyst for change. During the protests, the perception of Egypt's Tahrir drastically shifted from being the peaceful heart of downtown Cairo to a place that is dynamic and charged; it became a place overflowing with political discussions and engagements that cut across divisions between rich and poor, literate and illiterate, and Muslims and Christians. Tahrir provided a venue for exercising resistance and empowerment.

In the past years, many scholars have discussed the role of social media and mobile phones as powerful tools that spur civic engagement and mobilize people.

1 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

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In their study, Campbell and Kwak demonstrate the positive correlation between mobile phone use for exchanging information on the news and public affairs and engagement in political and civic life. The authors found that this is impacted by the technology competence level where "individuals who report higher levels of comfort with mobile telephony and use it for information exchange tend to be more civically and politically engaged than those who report less comfort with the technology."[2]

In a similar study by the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement,[3] the authors discuss how more youth in the Arab world and Egypt are subscribing to social media, which leads to more participation in civic spaces. The report highlights how during the Egyptian revolution, when thousands flocked to Tahrir Square, the "virtual streets," which were displayed all over social media, were not entirely separated from the "physical streets." The report also demonstrates how social media played a pivotal role in setting the scene for the revolution by providing an inexpensive alternative for motivating and mobilizing people to participate in civic activity, raising awareness, motivating activists, and presenting a virtual space when the physical one was limited.[4] Likewise, Rheingold[5] stresses the power of mobile phones in creating smart mobs. Drawing on literature from historic events, the author demonstrates how mobile communication can converge members of dispersed groups on a specific location simultaneously. Sander and Putnam[6] also note the huge youth civic engagement in America, yet they remain somewhat vigilant about the role of digital media in producing effects, calling it "in its infancy." In their book, Gordon and de Souza e Silva[7] tackle the role of net locality in transforming communities and engaging people in civic issues. Discussing the virtual Birmingham Briefing Hub (b-scape), they illustrate how the project "worked with 'virtual models' of the city to coordinate online interaction."[8] Such projects, they highlight, pose as useful tools that encourage people to participate in urban space and civic issues.[9]

2 Scott W. Campbell and Nojin Kwak, "Mobile communication and civic life: Linking patterns of use to civic and political engagement," *Journal of Communication* 60 (3) (2010), 536.
3 *Youth Activism and Public Space in Egypt* (Rep.), (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 2011).
4 Ibid., 22–23.
5 Howard Rheingold, *Smart mobs: The next social revolution*, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publ., 2009), 158–162.
6 Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam, "Democracy's Past and Future: Still Bowling Alone? – The Post–9/11 Split," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (1) (2010), 15.
7 Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva, "Net locality: Why location matters in a networked world", (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
8 Ibid, 113.
9 Ibid.

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Most of this scholarship explores how mobile phone usage plays a positive role in creating spaces for political and civic engagement. This engagement and mobilization, which is triggered via social interaction through the use of mobile technology, has created what Adriana de Silva e Souza calls "hybrid spaces." Hybrid spaces are understood as the merging of digital and physical spaces, which arises when "virtual communities…migrate to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technology as interfaces."[10] Despite the numerous studies that have investigated the relation between mobile technology and civic participation, there is not any research that introduces Tahrir as a hybrid space or applies Karen Barad's "agential realism" – a framework that introduces the concept of intra-action to reassess the binary modes of thinking.

This paper addresses two research questions: How can Tahrir be understood as an intra-active hybrid space? And how can Tahrir be reframed as an intra-active hybrid space? To address these questions, I use de Souza e Silva's concept of hybrid spaces and Karen Barad's agential realism as frameworks. Many of their concepts resonate with the events of the revolution and the understanding of Tahrir as a hybrid space that evolved not from the interaction but rather the intra-action of agencies. I first demonstrate how Tahrir Square can be understood as a hybrid space. Then, I propose an expansion of hybrid spaces to address the materialization of those spaces through agential realism. I argue that Barad's agential realism can provide a rich insight into the creation and understanding of those spaces, particularly during political unrest. Understanding hybrid spaces through agential realism entails giving up the relations of cause and effect, individual agency and subject-object dichotomies. To that end, I explore how Tahrir Square is an example of a place that has emerged through the intra-actions of different agencies in hybrid spaces. I investigate Tahrir as a hybrid space where agency is not endowed to individual entities but is coming from the whole; that is, the intertwining of the mobile technology, social media, the Egyptian people, the army, political parties, and the physical space which are entangled together in what Barad calls "phenomenon."

The paper has three main sections in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. In the first section, I discuss what Tahrir represents in the context of the revolution, as well as its political and historic importance. I focus on how Tahrir was transformed from a physical space into a symbol for the revolution. In the second section, I introduce and define hybrid spaces and agential realism. In the third section, I define intra-active hybrid spaces as spaces that emerge as a result of the simultaneous intra-actions of entangled entities from the digital and physical worlds. I focus on why intra-actions, as opposed to interactions, provide

10 Adriana de Souza e Silva, "From Cyber to Hybrid," *Space and Culture* 9 (3) (2006), 261.

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a better understanding. I conclude that the messiness of a hybrid space such as Tahrir Square can be better understood as an intra-active hybrid space.

What Tahrir Square represents in the context of the Egyptian revolution

In order to discuss Tahrir as a hybrid space, we must first unpack its contents and understand what the place was in the past and what it became in January 2011. Built in the nineteenth century, the design and architecture of the Square follows a western style, while the fourteen streets that branch out from the Square and into the city remain more of a marketplace. Its design reflects a "more conservative 'centripetal' view of the world suggesting as it does a fountainhead to which everything must inevitably lead back."[11] Its design and central location have made the Square an important site on several different levels that will be briefly highlighted.

In term of its history, Tahrir Square is home to some of the most ancient and highly important buildings in Egypt that capture the soul of the Egyptian civilization. The Egyptian Museum, the League of Arab States, the Mogamma administrative building, Omar Makram Mosque and the American University in Cairo are some of the few iconic places in Tahrir Square. Politically, the Square is surrounded by the cabinet headquarters as well as the People's Assembly.[12] Tahrir Square witnessed several other political protests before the events of January 2011. In 1919, the revolution of Ismailya Square, in honor of Khedive Ismail, took place there. Later in 1936 and 1946, Egyptians congregated in Tahrir to express their objection to the Anglo-Egyptian treaty and demand the departure of British troops. In later years, it witnessed the bread riots, as well as protests against Israel and the US invasion of Iraq. Despite the Square historically posing as a magnet for Egyptians to express their anger and disagreement, it soon returns to its peaceful and calm state and to being a symbol of the state power.[13]

The vigor and the ensuing bloody clashes of the January 2011 revolution, however, have transformed and reshaped this space in ways that cannot be restored. This transformation began when thousands of Egyptians occupied the Square in a revolt against the autocratic rule of President Hosni Mubarak. A few days before the revolution broke out, political parties used social media plat-

11 Mohamed Samir El-Khatib, "Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body and Power," *Theatre Research International*, 38 (2) (2013), 105.
12 Ibid, 106.
13 Zvi Bar'el, "Tahrir Square, From Place to Space: The Geography of Representation," *The Middle East Journal* 71(1) (2017), 9–22.

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forms such as Twitter and Facebook to ask the Egyptian community to congregate in Tahrir Square to demand the deposition of the Egyptian president. On the morning of January 25, 2011, a day labelled a "day of rage," thousands of Egyptians filled the streets and congregated in specified meeting points. Protestors, from Cairo and other cities, marched toward downtown to occupy Tahrir Square – a place that was now overcharged with tension, yet still overcrowded with food trucks and people selling Egyptian flags, as well as others who were singing and dancing on the streets. Coordinating their movement via social media, protestors tried to occupy the National Democratic Party's foreign ministry and the state television. It was not too long before the police started firing tear gas and shooting the demonstrators, whose chanting of "down with Mubarak" rocked Tahrir Square. The demonstrators would become dispersed and isolated, but soon connected and rebounded. One of the political activists demonstrated how the revolution organizers utilized their mobile devices connected to the Internet and their cameras to document incidents and upload them to social media to attract attention and rally support.[14] Reports state that three protestors and an officer were killed that day.[15] Starting with relatively small, disconnected groups of people, scattered at multiple places, the protestors, who were in constant contact on different social media platforms via their phones, soon became thousands. Several social and religious organizations eventually joined.

During the 18-day uprising, it is estimated that hundreds of people were killed in the clashes between Egyptians and the police forces. The physical space of Tahrir Square has become synonymous with the revolution and Arab Spring. Still, in 2019, the Square has never been reinstated to its original form. Being renamed "Martyrs Square," it has become a symbol of the tension and ongoing power struggle between the people and the state. In recent years, and to avoid any potential instability or uprisings, the government sometimes blocks many of the streets leading to Tahrir while placing unprecedented security measures to make sure that this place does not witness another revolution.

14 Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, "'We Are All Khaled Said': The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4 (2/3) (2012), 157.

15 Al Jazeera. (2011, February 14). Timeline: Egypt's revolution. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201112515334871490.html.

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Hybrid Spaces and Agential Realism

To better understand how Tahrir Square can be conceptualized as a hybrid space and how it can be reframed as an intra-active hybrid space, we need to shed light on some of the terminology crucial to the issue at hand. Public spaces can be defined in different ways. The understanding of the concept ranges from a strictly legal concept that regulates access rights to physical spaces to a more Habermasian abstract and symbolic understanding.[16] For this paper, space will be used in its broadest most inclusive sense as "a space for the people; a physical and ideological space of encounter, one that comprises historical, cultural and social dimensions."[17] De Souza e Silva introduces the concept of hybrid spaces to explain what happens when "the Internet became mobile and when communities previously formed in cyberspace could be found in urban (hybrid) spaces."[18] Hybrid spaces are defined as connected, mobile and social spaces that arise when "virtual communities (chats, multiuser domains, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games), previously enacted in what was conceptualized as cyberspace, migrate to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces."[19] Hybrid spaces are what de Souza e Silva calls "mobile spaces," which emerge through the constant movement of people carrying portable devices that are always connected to the Internet as well as to other users.[20] Put differently, the simultaneous occurrence of social practices in digital and physical spaces, due to the use of mobile technology, is what creates hybrid spaces.[21] With the pervasive use of mobile phones, the gap between physical and digital spaces has been blurred.[22] Mobile technologies promote "remote and local multipersonal communication and connection to the Internet, allowing users to exchange information while moving through urban spaces."[23] This new conceptualization of space leads to perceiving mobile phones as microcomputers embedded in public space, and it is in this sense that the Internet has become portable.[24]

On the other hand, agential realism proposes the "ontological inseparability of what are commonly perceived to be pre-existing and distinct entities"[25]; under-

16 *Youth Activism and Public Space in Egypt*, 7.
17 Ibid.
18 De Souza e Silva, "From Cyber to Hybrid," 273.
19 Ibid, 261.
20 Ibid, 262.
21 Ibid, 265.
22 Ibid, 263.
23 Ibid, 262.
24 Ibid.
25 Katie Warfield, "Making the Cut: An Agential Realist Examination of Selfies and Touch," *Social Media + Society* 2 (2) (2016), 1.

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mines the presupposed dichotomies of animals and humans, males and females, and nature and culture; and emphasizes the entanglement of all entities previously considered as separate.[26] It is natural to think of the world as being made of individual discrete objects and that "interactions happened between individuals that existed prior to the exchanges."[27] Barad's framework suggests that matter and meaning are inseparably entangled elements that can never be torn apart.[28] Entanglements, however, do not refer to the act of intertwining or connecting separate entities, but rather to the "lack of an independent, self-contained existence."[29] Barad also unsettles the concept of individualism: the conviction that individual entities, times and places exist.[30] Rejecting cause and effect, as well as individual agencies, Barad introduces the neologism "intra-action." Central to her theory, intra-action signifies the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies"[31] and challenges the default understanding of causality where "one or more causal agents precede and produce an effect."[32]

In the following section, I will demonstrate how Tahrir was created as a hybrid space during the incidents of January 2011 and will then propose and rationalize how this understanding can be expanded to reconceptualize Tahrir as an intra-active hybrid space and an entangled phenomenon.

Tahrir as an intra-active hybrid space

Tahrir Square has never been a static place, and the period following the revolution is no exception. Despite having always been a central spot in Cairo, Tahrir has gained more traction following the uprising.

A. Proposing Tahrir as a hybrid space

Employing de Souza e Silva's understanding, Tahrir Square can be introduced as a hybrid space. In her article *From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces*, de Souza e Silva demonstrates that hybrid spaces are

26 "Intra-actions," Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann, *Mousse Magazine* 34 (2012).
27 Ibid, 76.
28 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 3.
29 Karen Barad Biography. (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2019, from https://egs.edu/faculty/karen-barad.
30 "Intra-actions", Interview with Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann.
31 Ibid., 33.
32 Ibid., 77.

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created by "the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet and to other users."[33] Put differently, hybrid spaces bridge the gap between physical and digital environments when people are moving and while connected to the Internet via their mobile devices.[34] So, during the uprising, the Egyptian community interacted and relied heavily, if not solely, on social media in preparation for the revolution and on communication via their mobiles to create Tahrir as a meeting spot. They used their mobile devices to connect to Tahrir as a physical space. It is in this instance when the Egyptian community used social media on their phones to arrange for the demonstrations that Tahrir was created, to borrow from de Souza e Silva, as a "mobile space." It was developed through the constant movement of the Egyptians who heavily relied on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and text messages to plan for the uprising. The use of mobile technology on January 25, 2011, allowed for instant remote and local communication between the different individual protestors and political leaders and the facilitation of crowd congregation and movement through the different streets in Tahrir Square. It is at this instance that the disconnection between the physical and digital spaces started to diminish and Tahrir Square came to exist as a hybrid space.

B. Proposing Tahrir as an intra-active hybrid space: 'intra-active' versus 'interactive'

De Souza e Silva's notion of hybrid spaces, which involves the overlaying of the virtual communities using digital interfaces onto the physical space, is founded on the idea of interaction. The complexity of the revolution in Tahrir Square, however, can be further analyzed by proposing hybrid spaces as intra-active, as opposed to interactive, spaces. The concept of intra-action, as opposed to interaction, presents a paradigm shift. The usual understanding of interaction "presumes the prior existence of independent entities."[35] In other words, interaction assumes that agents exist prior to acting on each other.[36] It relies on a "metaphysics of individualism" that assumes the "prior existence of separately determinate entities."[37] Intra-action, by contrast, is the process in which "distinct agencies do not precede but rather emerge through their intra-action."[38] In other

33 De Souza e Silva, "From Cyber to Hybrid," 262.
34 Ibid., 263.
35 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 139.
36 "Intra-actions", Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann.
37 Ibid, 128.
38 Ibid, 33.

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words, it is through intra-actions that the properties of the "components of phenomena become determinate."[39] Intra-action refers to "the dissolution of boundaries between bodies in moving activity,"[40] as opposed to interactions that "freeze[] activity before generating a constructivist gap between bodies, and between bodies and materials, to generate knowledge."[41] Accordingly, intra-actions only become decipherable within their given entanglement. There are no intrinsic boundaries that separate self from other; it is through intra-actions that different subjects are constituted, making us presume dichotomies between subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans.[42]

With that in mind, the understanding of Tahrir as a hybrid space can be expanded by thinking of it instead as an intra-active hybrid space. Whereas an understanding of Tahrir as a hybrid space would presume that the creation of this space is a result of the interaction between the pre-existing agencies, namely, the mobile technology, the protestors, and the physical space, an intra-active understanding would assert that none of these entities pre-existed the creation of Tahrir as a hybrid space. According to agential realism, "these entities are always and already entangled and touching."[43] In other words, entities do not exist prior to the emergence of Tahrir as a hybrid space. They emerge as an entangled phenomenon, as part of, and in relation to, the materialization of Tahrir. Therefore, rather than indicating that the mobile technologies and the Egyptian protestors are separate individual entities that created Tahrir as a hybrid space, this separation can be constructed as a cohesive entangled phenomenon. Tahrir Square during the revolution was not a result of a duality between technology and the social interactions of Egyptians, but rather an entanglement of all humans and nonhumans that worked together to co-constitute and co-produce meaning. That is, Tahrir Square resulted from the intra-action of mobile technology, the protestors, the army, the political and religious parties, physical space, the buildings and stores in Tahrir, the cars that drove across Tahrir, etc.

Moreover, an intra-active understanding demonstrates that entities in Tahrir co-constituted each other. For example, the mobile technology and the Egyptian people have "intra-actively" constructed each other. The process of creating Tahrir as a hybrid space, and hence the instigation of the revolution, was an

39 Ibid, 139.

40 Christian Ehret, Ty Hollett, and Robin Jocius, "The Matter of New Media Making," *Journal of Literacy Research* 48 (3) (2016), 348.

41 Ibid.

42 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 379.

43 Warfield, "Making the Cut: An Agential Realist Examination of Selfies and Touch," 2.

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"iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking"[44] of the mobile technologies and the Egyptians. It is through the constant Facebook groups calling on the Egyptians to head to Tahrir, as well as Twitter posts asking to put an end to tyranny, that people decided to head to Tahrir. Simultaneously and co-constitutively, the Egyptians agreed to using the mobile technology and the social media posts to participate in the revolution and induce change.

With this in mind, Tahrir Square is constituted of agentive beings and "lively configurations of the world."[45] The dynamicity of the situation in Tahrir is understood as an "unfolding of endlessly equal relations of bodies-materials moving each other."[46] That is, Tahrir as an intra-active hybrid space is the mutual entangled relation between mobile technology–Egyptian protestors–political parties–the army–the physical space–the roads–the weather that day–etc. Therefore, instead of highlighting that the Egyptians communicated and interacted via their mobiles and congregated in Tahrir Square, we can put forward that "agency is co-constituted in the intra-activity of bodies-materials-environments."[47] Tahrir as a hybrid space is the intra-action of more than just human agencies. It is the intra-action of all those elements that acted as constituents in creating Tahrir as a hybrid space. This understanding does not deny human agency, but questions "the nature of agency and its presumed localization within individuals (whether human or nonhuman)."[48] Barad's intra-action not only highlights the entanglement of agencies, but also unsettles the role of individualism.

C. Phenomenon, as opposed to individualism, in creating Tahrir

Barad questions the nature of identity, "calling into question the individual/group binary,"[49] and proposes intra-action, which suggest that "meaning is not a property of individual bodies or technologies, but is a phenomenon."[50] Phenomena are the "ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting 'agen-

44 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, x.
45 Ibid, 381.
46 Ehret, Hollett, and Jocius, "The Matter of New Media Making," 350.
47 Ibid, 352.
48 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, x.
49 "Intra-actions", Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann, 77.
50 Paula Gardner and Barbara Jenkins, "Bodily Intra-actions with Biometric Devices," *Body & Society*, 22 (1) (2016): 11.

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cies'"[51] where entanglements are not distinct binary co-productions that are combined.[52] Thus, in light of Barad's phenomena, what caused the revolution? Was it the mobile technologies and the social interaction over social media? Or the Egyptians? The revolution enjoys "multiple indeterminacies"[53] where its emergence defies any attempt to be explained on the basis of individuals interacting with each other. Any effort to explain the revolution based on individual actors/groups interacting with one another seems to miss something about the nature of the Tahrir Square as an intra-active hybrid space.

In focusing on the Egyptian demonstrators, for example, as only one part of the entanglement, the current understanding of hybrid spaces would propose that mobile technologies are distinct entities that, when coupled with the usage and social interactions of the Egyptians as another individual entity, create Tahrir as a hybrid space. This perspective presumes that several different standalone individuals were combined together and that such a combination led to the creation of a hybrid space. It signifies a representationalist understanding, a view founded upon the distinction or separation among entities, which stems from our own experience of repeating boundary-making practices.[54] This understanding cannot sufficiently explain how Tahrir Square as a hybrid space came to exist.

While there is some truth to the understanding that the Egyptians in Tahrir Square appear to be individual, distinct and whole entities, a non-representational, intra-active conceptualization of hybrid spaces is more comprehensive. The demonstrators were "a series of interconnected flows, a collection of interconnected cells that have their own knowledge of what to do and how to do it."[55] The Egyptians, the Tahrir physical space, mobile technologies, the stores in the area, the cars on the street, all intra-acted and intra-related with each other. Their individuality and participation in the revolution did not end at the edge of their bodies[56]. Parts of them, for example, were outstretched and holding their mobile phones, which acted as extensions of their bodies rather than as distinct entities. If mobile networks were disrupted, they would not have congregated in the specified places; if transportation was not operating, no one would have been able to commute. No one single entity on its own was the cause of the revolution.

51 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 139.
52 Ibid., x.
53 "Intra-actions", Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann, 77.
54 Warfield, "Making the Cut: An Agential Realist Examination of Selfies and Touch."
55 Bronwyn Davies, "Reading Anger in Early Childhood Intra-Actions: A Diffractive Analysis," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20 (6) (2014): 739.
56 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 159.

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This is best understood as "flows in intra-action, rather than separate entities interacting with each other. Each one on its own is nothing. It dies. If one falters, the others are affected and may falter too or at least work a lot harder to compensate."[57] This understanding does not deny the existence of individuals yet rejects their individuality in the sense of being individually determinate. In other words, individuals only exist in their materializing relations.[58] The Egyptian revolution only occurred through the repeated intra-activity of the entangled phenomenon and not through the interaction of individual entities.

Conclusion

This paper has expanded on de Souza e Silva's hybrid spaces through Barad's agential realism to propose a new understanding of Egypt's Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution as an intra-active hybrid space where the Egyptians interacted via mobile social media to create the revolution. It shed light on how the different phenomena that brought the revolution about are entangled together through their intra-actions. By combining Souza e Silva's concept of hybrid spaces with Barad's neologism of intra-action, I analyzed Tahrir as an intra-active hybrid space, focusing on the messiness and dynamicity involved in the creation of this space. Hybrid spaces are intra-active, dynamic spaces, and therefore cannot be situated because they are "emergent and enmeshed in intra-activity that is continuously situation making."[59] Through agential realism, Tahir Square can be understood as a hybrid space where entities co-constitute one another and are amalgamated together in a rhizomatic structure. This approach introduces a new way of thinking of spaces as connected and inseparable tangles.

Future research might consider whether we are inhabiting a hybrid world. With the advent of technology, and being always connected – either through mobile networks or as enmeshed entities in Barad's phenomenon – have we reached a point when we are always in hybrid spaces? It might also consider looking into the role of intra-active hybrid spaces in classrooms, and how classroom activities that merge digital and physical spaces can be perceived as a phenomenon.

57 Davies, "Reading Anger in Early Childhood Intra-Actions: A Diffractive Analysis," 739.
58 "Intra-actions", Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann, 77.
59 Ehret, Hollett, and Jocius, "The Matter of New Media Making," 372.

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Katarzyna Ferworn-Horawa (University of Warsaw)

Aisthesis in Non/anthropocentric Perspective: The Consequences of Agential Realism for the Categories of Human and Nonhuman in Aesthetic Research

Abstract
The aim of my aesthetic research in the context of the agential realism of Karen Barad is twofold. First, I use Barad's relational ontology of *intra-action* to redefine *aisthesis* in the new-materialist context of the entanglement and inseparability of matter and meaning. Second, I show the benefits of diffractive re-readings in constructing the inclusive passage from anthropocentric aesthetics grounded in Aristotle and Immanuel Kant to post-human nonbinary and non-anthropocentric solutions in this field. To accomplish these aims, I present Jean-François Lyotard's re-reading of Kant in the perspective of Barad's epistem-ontology.
Keywords: agential realism, Lyotard, aisthesis, nonhuman, inhuman

The intention of the article is to position the category of *aisthesis*, rooted in an aesthetic tradition, within an expanded non-anthropocentric formula, and to show how such a perspective may be useful in investigating the problems implied by a human–nonhuman opposition. One of the propositions of such expansion is to place this aesthetic category in the context of a diffractive re-reading of Karen Barad and Jean-François Lyotard.

I re-read Jean-François Lyotard's conceptualisation of *the differend* (grounded in Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime) through Karen Barad's ontology of *intra-action* and their metaphysics of entanglement. The reason to re-read Lyotard through Barad, and *vice versa* Barad though Lyotard, is the fact that both develop a nondual approach to matter and meaning, but in different ways. Lyotard explores this relation as incommensurable in his concept of the *differend*,[1] and for Barad, matter and meaning are entangled and inseparable. I re-read

1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele (Manchester University Press, 1988), xi. Lyotard defines *the differend* as follows: "As distinguished from a litigation [dispute, argument], a differend [le différend] would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy."

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Lyotard's and Barad's understandings of heterogeneity, showing how their distinctive resolutions meet in the problematization of *the inhuman*,[2] which they similarly confront in relation to the notion of the nonhuman. Although their philosophical background is significantly different – Lyotard roots his stance in Immanuel Kant's sublime and Barad's in a particular interpretation of quantum physics – it is possible to find a profound resemblance between their attitudes to the human–nonhuman complex, and on this basis, to suggest an inclusive non/anthropocentric[3] perspective for *aisthesis*.

Such a proposition adds to previous inclusive encounters between Lyotard's thought and today's active philosophers. Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick give an example of this when they place Donna Haraway (Barad's close associate) in dialogue with Lyotard on the question of whether thought exists without a body.[4] Also, I follow Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin as they employ Lyotard's anti-dualistic intervention into universalizing discourses as an element "of the new materialist stance of what Bergson termed as "pushing dualism to an extreme", rephrased by Deleuze's statement that "difference is pushed to the limit."[5]

* * *

My research relates to the Greek term *aisthesis* as found in *De Anima* by Aristoteles, who presents the three powers (faculties) of the soul in the following hierarchical order: the nutritive (θρεπτική), sensitive (αἰσθητική), and rational (νοητική).[6] This systematization embeds anthropocentric standpoints with the hierarchy of organisms (plants, animals and humans) and excludes nonorganic forms of matter from the world of sensitive creatures. Agnieszka Bandura points out, however, that Aristotle already notes tensions and undefined borders between faculties – he perceives *aisthesis* as both a receptive and poietic intensity

2 I differentiate by the cursive font Lyotard's specific use of the word *inhuman* as in: Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*; Also, I read this category through Barad's use of the word as in: Barad, "On Touching-the Inhuman That Therefore I Am."

3 Karen Barad explains: "/" (slash) is not an "and" nor is it "either…or," it is cutting together/apart the terms involved (keynote talk: *What Flashes Up: Errant Wanderings/Wonderings: The Materiality of Imagining, the Imaginings of Materiality*; International Conference: Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches, Feb, 3–5, 2022, organised by the "Non-Anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity" Research Centre as part of the "Excellence Initiative – Research University" programme at the University of Warsaw.

4 Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg Adventures with Donna Haraway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

5 Rick Dolphijn and Iris ven der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), 44.

6 Christina S. Papachristou, "Three Kinds or Grades of Phantasia in Aristotle's De Anima," *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (8 June 2013): 19–48.

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that leads to the pleasure of intuitive cognition (*νοῦς*), logical thinking (*λόγος*) and action (*φρόνησις*).[7] For her, this line of thought is foundational to aesthetics as philosophy (as developed in *Aesthetica* by A.G. Baumgarten). What is more, it anticipates the Kantian assumption of free play between human faculties of cognition and the problem of the autonomy of aesthetic judgements, which are not grounded in conceptual intelligibility but in feelings of pleasure or displeasure, as presented in *Critique of Judgement*.[8] I interpret Kant's intuitions, rather than explicit statements, as the opening for the epistem-ontological turn in aesthetics: from the anthropocentric view based on human representations and the binary of nature–culture, and consequently matter–meaning, to the non/anthropocentric perspective, which takes an interest in the affective and relational being material and agential, and only sometimes entangled with being human. Lyotard's re-reading of Kant follows such a path in my view, leading him to the concept of the thought feeling itself,[9] which in turn is the opening for his specific category of *inhuman*.[10] He places the term *inhuman* within the framework of an incommensurability of matter and discourse resulting from their heterogeneity, which I analyse through Barad's concept of heterogeneity as agential entanglement and inseparability.

At this meeting point of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric epistem-ontologies, I propose to examine *aisthesis* as sensitivity and how it resonates with the notion of sensibility. I explore the possibility of detaching *aisthesis* not only from the animal and human realm but also, above all, from the organic, and placing it in the context of matter and meaning understood as autonomous nonhuman forces. As the final step, with the help of Barad's specific use of the term *insensible* and Lyotard's *inhuman*, I investigate *aisthesis* beyond materiality.

* * *

Karen Barad puts forward the following question: is mattering the matter of ethics, epistemology, ontology, or methodology, and how does it matter? She presents agential realism as ethico-epistem-ontology and activates the method of

7 Agnieszka Bandura, *Aἴσθησις. Zmysłowość i Racjonalność w Estetyce Tradycyjnej i Współczesnej* (Kraków: Universitas, Kraków, 2013).

8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41. Kant writes: "the judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement (neither a theoretical one nor a practical), and hence, also, is not grounded on concepts, nor yet intentionally directed to them."

9 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994), 25, 43.

10 Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*.

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philosophizing inspired by the physical phenomenon of diffraction: a superposition of different theories and practices. It is a post-critical performative intervention with critical methods of reflection (developed with Donna Haraway[11]) based on an epistemic correlational belief in representation. I follow her proposition of a continual and inclusive re-turning, re-reading, and re-writing of "insights through one another [in search] for patterns of constructive and deconstructive interference."[12] Such a methodology corresponds with the idea of creative humanities based on producing theory through practice, reflected in Bourdieu's notion of the *fuzziness of* practice, demanding no certainty, universality, or stability of process or result.[13] Creative humanities need creative concepts that "facilitate an exploratory and adventurous hypertextual reading and invite the reader to engage and critically navigate its terrain: to zoom in and zoom out; to connect and expand it with other concepts, cases, and questions; and to mobilize the concepts elsewhere and elsewhen – in future thinking, writing, making"[14] – as stated by Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff in their introduction to the newly published dictionary entitled *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities.* In this work, entries revisit each other and reflect the intersection of fields of thinking and making.[15] *Aisthesis* is not mentioned in the dictionary, and I treat my investigation as a supplement to its list of concepts.

* * *

In anthropocentric aesthetics, founded by A.G. Baumgarten, the category of *aisthesis* depicts the power of the senses to participate in the intelligible – human – knowing of the world. Barad's concept of intelligibility as "not a human-based

11 Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–87. As her main inspiration Karen Barad mentions Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/ed Others," *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 300.

12 Karen Barad, Malou Juelskjaer, and Nete Schwennesen, "Intra-Active Entanglements – an Interview with Karen Barad," *Kvinder, Koen Og Forskning* 1–2, no. 3 (2012): 12.

13 Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 4; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 12. Bolt applies Bourdieu's concept of "fuzziness" of practice to her materialist definition of the work(ing) of art.

14 Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff, *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities* (London, 2022), 2.

15 See also: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). There, in general terms, concepts are similarly reworked as intensities in movement.

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affair"[16] is the starting point of my argument in search for a non/anthropocentric perspective for *aisthesis*. Barad states:

> In traditional humanist accounts, intelligibility requires an intellective agent (that to which something is intelligible), and intellection is framed as a specifically human capacity. But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently. And knowing does not require intellection in the humanist sense, either; knowing is a matter of differential responsiveness (as performatively articulated and accountable) to what matters.[17]

Barad equates meaning and becoming,[18] which I treat as fundamental to the beginning of my positioning of *aisthesis* in not only a nonhuman but also a purely material perspective.

The above realist statement on intelligibility as ontological performance of heterogeneity – "differential becoming of the world" – places Barad in the very centre of the epistem-ontological problem of representation and the access to the modality of the thing-in-itself – in that sense to the modality of the nonhuman – which started with Kant's transcendental critical method. In my view, Barad's understanding of intelligibility as the nonhuman mutual determination of phenomena within relation is where anthropocentrism is challenged in terms of its very core belief in representation and where the question of *aisthesis* as a nonhuman power of materiality arises.

Robert Booth puts Barad's realism in the context of Kantian solutions. He points to the problem of dealing with the "good" and the "bad Kant"[19] in all realistic stances. The "good Kant" rightly inaugurates correlationism: the human observer is not innocent and passive. The thing-in-itself should not be reduced to the thing-for-us, as is the case in scientific realism. The "bad Kant" absolutizes correlation as if there was no difference between perception and representation and as if correlation was a straightforward mediation. In solutions based on representation, things-in-themselves become part of human conceptual construction and performativity: for Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, it is the ideological scheme of dominance; for phenomenology based on Edmund Husserl – the intentional horizon of consciousness; and for Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hilary Putnam – a part of the language in use. Booth argues that the answer to the question of whether nonhuman entities can be addressed on their terms divides

16 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 824.

17 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Duke University Press, London, 2007), 379–80.

18 See also: Rebekah Sheldon, "Matter and Meaning," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 30 (2016).

19 Robert Booth, "Process Metaphysics and the Shadow of Kant," *Continuum*, 2008, 5.

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natural process metaphysics, such as that of Quentin Meillassoux, Steven Shaviro and Karen Barad, which derive in a more or less direct way from Alfred North Whitehead's concept of an organism.[20] Booth quotes Whitehead on how he positions himself in relation to Kant:

> The philosophy of organism is the inversion of Kant's philosophy […] For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world – a 'superject' rather than a 'subject.' The word 'object' thus means an entity which is a potentiality for being a component in feeling; and the word subject means the entity constituted by the process of feeling, and including this process.[21]

According to Booth, the more-Whiteheadian form of escape of speculative realisms (for example, that of Steven Shaviro) ends up subsuming nonhuman entities under human categories of identity, intentionality, and autonomy. Anthropocentrism turns into anthropomorphism. As we will see, Karen Barad provides a less-Whiteheadian argument based not on speculation but on quantum physics as a means to escape the anthropocentric vicious circle. Booth however, criticizes Barad for the fact that she totalises science as a base for philosophy and thus falls back into the anthropocentric trap of nonsituated and disembodied "forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims"[22] as conceptualised by Donna Haraway.

For Lyotard, Kant is the first philosopher of the modern affective turn[23] towards the understanding of affect as nonhuman because he explicitly grounds the power of rational human intelligibility in the affective and relational transcendental field.[24] In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard introduces the notion of what I coin as *thought-feeling-itself* when he talks of "the feeling that thinking has of itself in the very act of thinking."[25] He explains:

> Any act of thinking is thus accompanied by a feeling that signals to thought its "state". But this state is nothing other than the feeling that signals it. For thought, to be informed of its state is to feel this state – to be affected.[26]

20 Ibid.
21 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 88.
22 Haraway, Donna, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 583.
23 Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime.*
24 Marek Jan Siemek, *Idea Transcendentalizmu u Fichtego i Kanta : Studium z Dziejów Filozoficznej Problematyki Wiedzy* (PWN Warszawa, 1977); Gilles Deleuze, *Filozofia Krytyczna Kanta. Doktryna Władz*, trans. Bogdan Banasiak (słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk, 1999); Paul de Man, *Ideologia Estetyczna*, trans. Artur Przybyszewski (słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk, 2000).
25 Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 43.
26 Ibid., 11.

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In Lyotard's analysis of aesthetic reflection, *aisthesis* is the sensation that "signals where the mind is on the scale of affective tints."[27] What is more, he notices that this process of reflecting based on feeling (of pleasure in the beautiful or displeasure in the sublime experience) does not demand the subject and that the notion of *thought-feeling-itself* is sufficient. He writes: "There is not one subjectivity that experiences pure feelings; rather, it is the pure feeling that promises a subject."[28] Unlike Whitehead, Lyotard acknowledges the importance of Kant's insights into affectivity as a condition for intelligibility, claiming that in the sublime feeling, where the free play of cognitive faculties exposes their incommensurability, the stable construction of the intelligible subject–object relation is impossible; its location can be only relational and precarious.

Stephen Zepke, in his comparative study of Kant's concept of the sublime in the aesthetics of Lyotard (as well as in Jacques Rancière and Gilles Deleuze), also shows how Kant in the third *Critique* inspires the three philosophers, who are fundamentally concerned with *aisthesis*,[29] to take a path beyond the human in the analysis of conditions of intelligible experience. He writes:

> Kant's Critique of Judgment explores the transcendental implications of aesthetic experience and in particular its impact on the relations between empirical sensation, emotional feeling and thought. It is with the sublime that these relations are thoroughly rethought, as it offers a type of aesthetic experience that takes us beyond the universally shared conceptual conditions of experience. […] In this sense, the sublime takes us beyond the normative conditions of the human itself.[30]

Effectively, Kant seeks a bridge between the forces he has himself divided: sensitivity and intelligibility, and within that, between matter and human concepts. Lyotard proclaims the impossibility of such an overpass in the form of universal knowledge based on representation and introduces *the differend* as the *thought-feeling-itself* which cannot be represented, only sensed and witnessed. Barad, in turn, does not ask about the representation of the real but poses the ethico-epistem-ontological question about the conditions of engagement and creation founded by intelligibility experienced as constant re-configurations of reality in space and time, i. e., *intra-actions* performing agential cuts.

* * *

27 Ibid., 10.

28 Ibid., 20.

29 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (Verso, London, 2013); Jacques Rancière, *Dzielenie Postrzegalnego*, trans. Maciej Kropiwnicki and Jan Sowa (Korporacja ha!art, Kraków, 2007); Deleuze, *Filozofia Krytyczna Kanta. Doktryna Władz*; Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*

30 Stephen Zepke, *Sublime Art. Towards an Aesthetics of the Future* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 15.

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Intra-action – according to Barad's anti-representational approach to matter and meaning – is based on her interpretation of facts brought to light by quantum physics. Barad concludes from experiments in laboratories of physics: "Quantum phenomena suggest an ontology based on entanglement where relations take primacy over *relata*."[31] In agential realism, relations – such as subject–object, cause–effect, and human–nonhuman – do not result from stable entities conflating at some moment in space and time. Phenomena emerge as intra-acting agencies performing cuts, producing other *intra-actions*, which Barad observes as, what they call, apparatuses and material-discursive practices.[32] Agential cuts produce arrangements of determination within relation – boundaries and exclusions. Barad explains *intra-action* as an event when "'part' of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another 'part' of the world."[33] Human concepts are just specific material–agentive arrangements – vide *intra-actions*; they are the agencies of a material-discursive production of knowledge. She writes: "Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming."[34]

Barad embraces the metaphysical consequences of her relational and realistic approach to heterogeneity with the help of two notions – entanglement and inseparability:

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.[35]

The above perspective is the result of Barad's implementation of Bohr's complementarity principle[36]: determining boundaries and what they exclude, determinacy and indeterminacy, matter and void, and thing(ness) and nothing-(ness) are not only entangled but inseparable in a metaphysical way. In her

31 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 471.

32 Martin Savransky makes an important amendment to Barad's relational ontology. What Barad calls *relata* Savransky chooses to name after Whitehead as modes of endurance: "stubborn facts" that participate in modes of encounter that form patterns of relevance. According to Savransky, "relation must come-to-terms with *relata*." Reducing *relata* to the component of relation mutes their relevancy and thus existence outside that relation. See: Martin Savransky, "Modes of Mattering: Barad, Whitehead, and Societies," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 30 (2016).

33 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 335.

34 Ibid., 141.

35 Ibid., ix.

36 Barad never insists on both entanglement and complementarity principles being the prerequisites of her metaphysics. However, in my view, only together do they act as a foundation for the metaphysics of agential realism.

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purpose to avoid binary structures, she first introduces the notion of meeting halfway[37] as heterogeneity within the immanence of *intra-action*, i. e., the mattering of intelligibility in the ontological act (agential cut) of mutual determination within relation. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad makes an anti-essentialist statement to which Lyotard would agree, I presume:

> […] time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.[38]

Later in her writings they specify that the exploration of entanglement and inseparability together is an invitation to think "with and through dis/continuity,"[39] which is explicitly inspired by the phenomenon of quantum discontinuity.

In Barad's philosophy, heterogeneity can be seen, first, through the complementarity principle governing determinacy – agential boundaries and exclusions are inseparable within and as relation; second, through the notion of dis/continuity – the possibility of being cut *together/apart* – at one moment un/doing, and/or, here/there, now/then, im/possible, im/probable, or non/human.[40] *Intra-action* means becoming determined and intelligible – "sensible" as Barad puts it.[41] Intelligibility for Barad means having material boundaries that matter. They write about "[…] a felt sense of différance, *of intra-activity, of agential separability – differentiatings that cut together/apart* […]."[42] I notice here a major similarity between Barad saying that the sense of *intra-activity* is to be "felt" and Lyotard's concept of *thought-feeling-itself*, which can only be witnessed. What is more, Barad talks of matter, the sensible, as being entangled with the insensible – the void. Their claim that "Quantum field theory […] is a call, an alluring murmur from the insensible within the sensible"[43] echoes Lyotard's

37 See: Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism without Contradiction," in *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson, Holland: Kluwer Press, Dordrecht 1996, 161–94.

38 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

39 Karen Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come," *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (10 November 2010): 240.

40 See: Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 121–58; Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come." All expressions with '/' are quoted from these two texts.

41 Barad, "On Touching-the Inhuman That Therefore I Am."

42 Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come," 241.

43 Barad, "On Touching-the Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 208.

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analysis of the invisible within the visible.[44] She suggests that materiality and meaning are dis/continuously engaged with the void, which exceeds the human mind but not the feeling as such. My understanding of Barad's intentions is that sensibility emerges as determinacy – *intra-action* – within the sensitivity of indeterminacy. Does it mean that sensitivity and insensibility equate?

* * *

In exploring *aisthesis* in the context of *thought-feeling-itself* (Lyotard) and "felt sense" (Barad), it is additionally helpful to examine the distinctions articulated by affective theory, mainly by Brian Massumi,[45] between emotion and affect. His approach to affect makes it also possible for me to further distinguish sensibility and sensitivity. He associates affect with autonomous and embodied intensity. According to Massumi, there is no theoretical vocabulary that would distinguish affect from emotion – the latter recognized as subjective, experienced as personal, and, as such, inserted "into the semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning."[46] Affect has its own logic (alogic – one might say) that escapes human thought, language, or culture. Despite making a clear distinction between affect and emotion, Massumi wants to evade binary solutions of body–mind, nature–culture, human–nonhuman: "the concepts of nature and culture need serious reworking, in a way that expresses the irreducible *alterity* of the nonhuman in and through its active connection to the human, and vice versa."[47] Following such a line of reasoning, it is possible to draw parallel threads in which sensitivity pertains to the "logic" of affect (one could say – alogic of indeterminacy) and sensibility to the "logic" of emotion ("narrativizable" determinacy).

Rebekah Sheldon diffractively re-reads Massumi and Barad (which she also performs through Deleuze and Guattari's approach to concepts).[48] According to Sheldon, Massumi contributed to the autonomization of affect from meaning understood as the intentionality of human consciousness,[49] but at the same time explored meaning as the relational event of the flow from asignification to signification, and back. As already discussed, Barad goes further to equate meaning

44 Jean-François Lyotard, "Anamnesis of the Visible," trans. Couze Venn and Roy Boyne, *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 107–19.

45 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, 1995.

46 Ibid., 88.

47 Ibid., 100.

48 Sheldon, "Matter and Meaning".

49 See also: Charles Altieri, "Affect, Intentionality, and Cognition: A Response to Ruth Leys", *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2012); Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique", *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434–72; William E Connolly, "The Complexity of Intention", *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 791–98.

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with becoming material. Sheldon offers an analogy of affect and meaning: she defines both as "an autonomous force[s]."[50] Using her proposition, I distinguish sensitivity from sensibility as two intervening forces, but from the view of Barad's relational ontology, they are not autonomous but entangled and inseparable. By "being sensible," Barad means "being determinate" (having material boundaries) and intelligible (having meaning) within *intra-action*, but also being entangled with what is excluded by the determining boundaries – *the insensible.* For Barad behind the objects of the sense world there is an entangled realm, where categories of identity and locality do not apply. In light of the concept of dis/continuity, I understand that matter and meaning do not exist other than within the sensitivity of nothingness, and sensibility is the outcome of an affective agential cut within relation. In Barad's own words:

> A cacophony of whispered screams, gasps, and cries, an infinite multitude of indeterminate beings diffracted through different spacetimes, the nothingness, is always already within us, or rather, it lives through us.[51]

It is possible to conclude that *aisthesis* is an event – always material, singular and situated – of agential sensibility and, consequently, of intelligibility within the sensitivity of the insensible. Sensitivity and sensibility mutually condition each other in a dis/continuous manner. Only when intelligibility is performed through conceptual mediation is the sensible relation human.

* * *

The meeting of Barad's and Lyotard's understandings of heterogeneity leads me to bring together their remarks on the notion of the *inhuman*, which further enriches the perspective on *aisthesis.*

In *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, Lyotard states: "The time has come to philosophize."[52] He connects the statement with two limitations of human thought. First is the inevitable end of our cosmic existence: "after the sun's death there won't be a thought to know that its death took place."[53] Second is *the differend* – incommensurability between ontologically heterogeneous parties. In those two perspectives, Lyotard investigates the possibility of two notions of the *inhuman* that are radically heterogeneous: "[…] what if human beings, in humanism's sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman (that's the first part)? And (the second part), what if what is 'proper' to hu-

50 Sheldon, "Matter and Meaning".
51 Barad, "On Touching-the Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 214.
52 Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, xiii.
53 Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, 9.

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mankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?"[54] Lyotard is talking about two possible *inhuman* "things."[55] Barad might say "agencies," which would highlight what Lyotard in *Discourse, figure* calls the depth or "thickness"[56] of language.

The first *inhuman* "thing" is the agency of what we know that we do not know, of what we see that we do not see, namely, the inhuman systems of power that organise matter and meaning, such as language, knowledge, capitalism, cosmos, or quantum physics. The inhuman agency of institutions and laws exceeds human understanding and agency but stays thinkable and visible. The second *inhuman* "Thing" (which Lyotard emphasizes by the capital T) is the agency of what we do not know that we do not know – the heterogeneity of indeterminacy. It is the *inhuman* agency of the unthinkable and uncommunicable – the *inhuman* agency of the invisible – which constitutes the sensory value and the expressive power of silence within signs or the void within matter. As Lyotard writes in *The Inhuman*, it is a mistake to believe "[…] that the first can take over from the second, give it expression."[57] Still, the human mind is "haunted by a familiar and unknown guest"[58] of the *inhuman*, which agitates for expression and response.

Barad, in turn, writes: "Hauntings are not immaterial, and they are not mere recollections or reverberations of what was. Hauntings are an integral part of existing material conditions."[59] She gives her definition of *the inhuman:*

> The inhuman is not the same as the nonhuman. While the "nonhuman" is differentially (co-)constituted (together with the "human") through particular cuts, I think of the inhuman as an infinite intimacy that touches the very nature of touch, that which holds open the space of the liveliness of indeterminacies that bleed through the cuts and inhabit the between of particular entanglements.[60]

Sensitivity, viewed through *the inhuman* of both Lyotard and Barad, allows the question of a*isthesis* beyond determinacy to be posed. Karen Barad surprisingly writes about the "*sensibility of the void*" and the queer "perversity of touch,"[61] which is what the void is. She takes us far into quantum field theory when she asks

54 Ibid., 2.
55 Monika Murawska, "Ludzkie versus Nie-Ludzkie. Negacja Sztuki Według Jeana-François Lyotarda." *Tekstualia* 2, no. 49 (2017): 7–20.
56 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 1971).
57 Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, 2.
58 Ibid.
59 Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable," in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. M. Fritsch and P. Lynes (Fordham University Press, New York, 2018), 74.
60 Barad, "On Touching-the Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 220.
61 Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity."

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about "the measure of nothingness,"[62] asking what happens when a human lights the torch of the mind and looks with the highest possible subtlety at the void. Absence of matter, no sound, no light, no thought, no consciousness – absolute indifference is destroyed at the very moment of differentiation by measurement because the apparatus of measurement conditions what it is bound to measure – it is like switching on the light to see the darkness. Lyotard argues that there is a primary incommensurability when matter activates senses and becomes meaningful. This is why artistic practice takes on the burden of not representing but witnessing *the differend.* One of the many examples he refers to is the painting practice of Karel Appel and his use of chromatic arrangements of colour:

> The matter in play in art awaits nothing, demands nothing. The artist knows that in presenting it he forms it, and that in forming it he violates it. This trait is enough to substract the matter of the artistic gesture from the meanings that philosophy and science confer upon it. It suggests that, indifferent to determination, formation, or destination, matter is not presentable in itself. It is, in this sense, immaterial.[63]

Lyotard pushes the paradox embedded in the concept of *the differend* to the limit and faces immanence meeting transcendence[64] in *the immaterial.* Correspondingly, Barad presents the intricacies of dis/continuity of matter, meaning and void – the in/determinacy. The two philosophical stances together offer a non/anthropocentric perspective for *aisthesis.* Being sensitive is being entangled with the "thickness" of what can never be excluded. The aesthetic momentum when sensitivity and sensibility meet halfway, and face *the differend*, is the core of what is entangled and inseparable in the material sense, which can only be "felt" and witnessed.

Conclusion

I have shown that the new-materialist nonbinary stance of agential realism opens up the paradoxes embedded in being human that have been opened before in processes of creating concepts that flux and activate the theory entangled with practice. I presented the meeting of Barad and Lyotard (and also Kant, Massumi, and Sheldon) as an inclusive flow where contradictions intervene in a productive way. To create a set of tools, useful in escaping the human–nonhuman opposi-

62 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable."

63 Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel. A Gesture of Colour* (Leuven University Press, 1992), 70–71.

64 See: Piotr Schollenberger, *Jednostkowość i Wydarzenie. Studia z Estetyki Lyotarda* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, 2019). Schollenberger situates Lyotard in between philosophies of immanence and transcendence.

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tion, I positioned the non/anthropocentric category of *aisthesis* as sensibility within sensitivity in the context of two differing approaches to heterogeneity – Lyotard's incommensurability and Barad's entanglement, inseparability and dis/continuity. The process revealed an unexpectedly similar, paradox notion of *the inhuman* in the two philosophies, which I treat as an opening for the exploration of *aisthesis* beyond materiality.

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Intra-action as a Curious Practice: Emerging Response-abilities in Monica Gagliano's *Thus Spoke the Plant*

Abstract
The new material turn has queered the conventional, anthropocentric conception of plants as passive, inert, inanimate entities to a site of narrativity, vibrant with meaning and agency. The paper situates itself within this nonhuman turn, drawing on Karen Barad's neologism, 'intra-action,' as a political framework to account for stories that enlarge the competencies of plants or result in 'ontological choreographies' through the cultivation of a virtue hailed as the 'curious practice' by Donna Haraway. The study analyses Monica Gagliano's 'phytobiography' *Thus Spoke the Plant* (2018), to reveal ways of humans 'thinking-with,' and 'becoming-with,' plants while in the process rendering each other capable, as part of opening up possibilities of partially recuperative futures.
Keywords: Intra-action, Curious Practice, Response-abilities, Ontological Choreographies, Phytobiography

Earth is filled with stories, the stories of humans, nonhumans, and all materialities that are 'intra-actively' co-constituted. The inception and burgeoning of the new material school, informed by the voices of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Isabelle Stengers, Serpil Oppermann, Serenella Iovino, Bruno Latour, and many others, has queered the conception of plants as inert entities into sites of narrativity, being morphologically active, vibrant with meaning and agency. Contemporary anthropology and plant philosophy also provide important impulses in this regard. Mention should be made of Suzanne Simard (*Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, 2021), Natasha Myers and her concept of Planthroposcene, Michael Marder (*Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, 2013, *Through Vegetal Being. Two Philosophical Perspectives*, 2016, co-authored with Luce Irigaray), Paco Calvo (*Planta Sapiens: Unmasking Plant Intelligence*, 2023) and many others.

This shift from the received ways of knowing and being to the foregrounding of the agency of plants has become the need of the hour in a world troubled by the escalating consequences of the Anthropocene. It is crucial that we responsibly engage with our planet's fellow inmates as this would open up the possibility of

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partially recuperative futures. Therefore, the paper employs Karen Barad's neologism, 'intra-action,' as a political framework to better account for the agency of plants within "a congealing of agency".[1] Through the lens of this framework, the paper seeks to explore how plants with their human and nonhuman entanglements, actively and iteratively shape or re/configure our world.

The new materialist, feminist and posthuman physicist Karen Barad in their influential work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) postulates a relational ethico-onto-epistemological philosophy of 'agential realism,' which conceives the universe to be comprised of phenomena characterized by "the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies".[2] It swerves from the conception of the world as being made of discrete objects that interact with each other to an ontology where discrete entities do not pre-exist but rather emerge through their intra-actions, i. e., matter as "the materialization of relationships".[3] Therefore, intrinsic to this philosophy is an ethics that holds accountability of all entities involved, for the relationalities of becoming, of which they are a part. The study employs the ethico-onto-epistemology of 'intra-action' to discover unexpected collaborations between humans, nonhumans, and apparatuses, thus challenging the notion that agency and the ability to be responsive and creative are exclusive to humans. However, to foreground nonhuman agency in an anthropocentric world, one needs to cultivate attentiveness and patience, which is hailed as 'arts of noticing' by Anna Tsing and 'curious practice' by Donna Haraway.

Donna J. Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) argues for building creative connections, or odd kins, as an effective way to live in 'response-ability' on a damaged planet. For Haraway, 'response-ability' implies the ability to respond, attending to the response of the other, and an obligation to be responsive to the other. This process of cultivating response-ability is what Haraway calls a 'curious practice,' and it entails the seeker to allow his/her mind to go beyond what is already known by nature or education. The two significant features of a 'curious practice' include, firstly, training one's imagination to stray away from the beaten path in order to encounter the unexpected, and to ask and respond to interesting questions, proposing something unanticipated, and secondly, to think from a 'heritage,' that is, to speak from situated worlds, to delineate the ramifying webs that are unknown and to transform knowledge by the very deed of inheriting.

1 Karen Barad, "Intra-actions: Interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinmann," in *dOCUMENTA,* 13, Issue of Mousse Magazine, (2012), 80.

2 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.

3 Barad, *Intra-actions*, 76.

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Recently, there has been a mushrooming of narratives that highlight the intra-action of human and nonhuman agencies, which are broadly categorized as eco-narratives, entangled fictions (Suvadip Sinha), multispecies ethnographies (Eben Kirksey, Stefan Helmreich), etc. The field of study has been further narrowed down to closely examine the intra-active materialization of each nonhuman actant in specific 'spacetimemattering' (Barad). For instance, the narratives that focus on the agency of plants and human-plant interactions in literature have been labeled as 'phyto-criticism' by Michael Serres in his work *Le Parasite* (1980), 'literary botany' by John Ryan Haule in *Roots and Branches: The Symbolic Imagination of Plants* (1990), and 'critical plant studies' by Monica Gagliano, John Ryan and Patrícia Vieira in their edited volume *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017). All these approaches focus the vitality of plants and their cultural expressions and is interdisciplinary in nature as they draw on disciplines such as literature, art, science, social and ecological studies. Adopting such interdisciplinary, collaborative, and multispecies approach is crucial for a sustainable and equitable society that does not just prioritize on capital-driven industrialization that conceives plants as mere commodities, rather shift the attention towards comprehensive research, both about and with plants. Being mindful of this, the study analyzes the Australian Research Associate Professor in Evolutionary Ecology, Monica Gagliano's *Thus Spoke the Plant* (2018), a narrative that reiterates the agency of plants in the making of the worlds. The study draws on Anna Tsing's proposal of developing 'ontological choreographies'[4] (Haraway) through collaboration and engagement with scientists, farmers, hunters, indigenous people, activists, and artists, to account for plant agency that is intra-actively co-constituted while rendering each other capable.

Monica Gagliano's "phytobiography" *Thus Spoke the Plant*, is proposed to be a narrative written in partnership with plants that enlarges and even invents the competencies of both the plants and the observer involved. The narrative resembles the scientific fervor demonstrated in Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird's engaging introductory text to plant sentience, *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973), which provides empirical evidence of the ability of plants to exhibit emotional responses when exposed to a life threat. However, Gagliano builds on Tompkins and Bird's text by unraveling the complex web of agencies, that contribute to the materialization of plant agency, including but not limited to indigenous practices, music, dreams, dieting, discipline, and apparatuses, which makes her writing sacrilegious within the scientific academia. Through her

4 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 165. In her work, Haraway employs the term 'ontological choreographies' borrowed from Charis Thompson to describe the ways in which human and nonhuman entities co-create the world while shaping each other's ontologies through their interactions.

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narrative, Galiano challenges two widely accepted notions that have taken on a commonsensical appeal such as the rigid dichotomy between social and scientific domains as well as the notion of scientific practices as objective reality that is institutionally ratified and unquestionable. Gagliano highlights the influence of social and cultural factors in shaping scientific practices and their interpretations. Her approach focuses on analyzing the dynamic and reciprocal nature of entanglements that the human and nonhuman entities weave with the plants, a recognition of which is crucial to unwind their agential-realistic ontology.

The narrative of *Thus Spoke the Plant* unveils Gagliano as a curious practitioner, who works with plants, pays attention to their expressions and responds accordingly. Gagliano describes the narrative as a 'phytobiography,' wherein the

> [h]uman is a listener who filters out personal noise to hear plants speak, who engages in active dialogue with these nonhuman intelligences, which are far more real than our current scientific constructs allow us to contend with. Here, the human acts as a co-author who physically delivers those conversations to the page. As such, these stories emerge out of a human-plant collaborative endeavor and a mixed writing style, which I think we can fittingly call plant-writing.[5]

Gagliano's phytobiography resonates with Beth Dempster's term 'sympoiesis,' borrowed and propagated by Haraway, which amalgamates the Greek words 'sún', meaning 'together', and 'poiesis', meaning 'creation or production,' to refer to 'making-with,' dissolving strict dichotomies, and exclusivist approaches while promoting the 'sympoiesis' of human agencies with nonhumans, which is a continuous coalescing of 'naturecultures'.[6] The narrative is an autobiographical recounting of the author's personal journey as a scientist, discovering how plants possess intelligence, agency, and sentience, while contesting conventional biases and prejudices. The narrative unveils how plants listen, respond, and remember through empirical evidence from the study of fennel and basil seeds, the mimosa plant, and pea plants.

The narrative depicts how Gagliano cultivates 'curious practice' by engaging with the indigenous Shipibo community residing along the banks of the Ucayali River of the Amazonian rainforest in Peru. Their worlding practice inculcates an alternative epistemology, social structure, and ethical principles that transcends capitalism and colonialism opening up possibilities of other worlds capable of creating a more resilient and sustainable future. Norgaard and Fenelon argue that the participation of the indigenous communities in various land management and ecological activities holds enormous cultural, political, and spiritual

5 Monica Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2018), 15.
6 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 32.

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significance, which becomes central to their identity, political struggles, and everyday realities.[7] Similarly, the Shipibo community with whom Gagliano engages with, embraces a multispecies relational worldview with a profound understanding of justice involving obligations to other species. Their world-making practices find personhood in a multitude of natural entities, thereby encouraging them to work in partnership with nonhumans. Gagliano explicitly portrays the Shipibo community's custodianship and the acknowledgement of plant agency as, "For the Shipibo, working with plants is a scared practice that involves deep respect and reverence for the natural world. They see themselves as stewards of the land, entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining balance and harmony in the ecosystem".[8] These ethical systems that revolve around relationships with responsibilities to both human and nonhumans offer ways of thinking-with, grieving-with, and becoming-with the nonhumans as part of creating recuperative futures.

The Shipibo people enlighten Gagliano about the vital nature of plants, which forms an integral part of their cultural narratives, expressed in the form of stories, songs, and spiritual practices. Laura Lee Dev posits,

> Shipibo methods for relating with and knowing plants include communicating with plant spirits or *ibo*. Healing knowledge, for one, comes from collaborative, intimate interactions and dialogue with the *ibo,* which often arise in intuitions, dreams and visions. Singing, dieting, and consuming ayahuasca ceremonially are methods for accessing or channeling the knowledge and songs of the *ibo*.[9]

The Shipibo community's indigenous epistemologies regard plants as allies and teachers that play a significant role in their traditional medicinal and spiritual practices. They believe that the spirits of plants or *ibo* could provide them access to the spiritual realm and offer insights into the workings of the world. Grounding on this, *Thus Spoke the Plant* unveils the agency of dreams, visions, and dieting practices in unfolding and enlarging the ontology of plants, which is indeed dismissed by the scientific community as superstition or idolatry. Gagliano, kindled by the worlding practice of the Shipibo community, dares to ask the impermissible question, which is "Could plants in my scientific laboratory communicate with each other with sound?"[10] Her ability to find plants as actively interesting, even while others claimed to know a lot about them, makes her a curious practitioner. According to Barad, "Responsibility entails providing op-

7 Kari Marie Norgaard and James V. Fenelon, "Towards an Indigenous Environmental Sociology," in *Handbook of Environmental Sociology,* edited by Beth Schaefer Caniglia et al. (Cham: Springer, 2021), 477–94.

8 Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, 124.

9 Laura Lee Dev, *Plants and Pathways: More-than-Human Worlds of Power, Knowledge, and Healing*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, 2020), 186.

10 Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, 29.

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portunities for the organism to respond,"[11] which is exactly what Gagliano does. She elucidates, "how would [one] learn of what is presently unknown about our vegetal ways of communicating if [one is] not looking for it and do not even realize that it may exist? Generously, he had also provided the answer—excludethe known to allow [oneself] to see what unexpected things might happen,"[12] Thus, Gagliano calls for the need to cultivate the virtue of allowing agency to intra-actively materialize rather than being asserted upon.

Peter Wohlleben, in his engaging text *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015), delineates the various ways in which plants communicate with their fellow beings, such as through airborne chemical signals, light signals, and the extensive fungal networks known as the wood wide web. In *Thus Spoke the Plant*, Gagliano, by means of her curious practice, further enlarges the competency of plants by unveiling their ability to communicate using 'voice,' which subsequently invited ridicule from academic circles due to her inability to provide empirical evidence. This was later empirically proved and made official by other scientists in England as the corn kernels "decided to break the silence with their vibratory signals."[13] This proposition not only broadened the ontological and epistemological possibilities for plants but also critiqued the ontological privilege attached to humans owing to their anthropocentric behavior which has culminated in the silencing of the plants. Gagliano notes, "We do this by unconsciously ignoring them or deliberately stripping them away."[14] Therefore, Gagliano's narrative calls for responsible intervention in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering. In her quest to uncover the narratives of plants, Gagliano discovers that in the language of plants, the phrase "Orynghamˮ translates to "thank you for listening."[15]

Moreover, *Thus Spoke the Plant* disavows a vision of growth perceived exclusively in terms of capital accumulation that objectifies plants as mere commodities without attaching any intrinsic value to them. She posits, "wheat, oats, and barley are reduced to slavery as crops on production lines and eucalyptus and pine trees tamed and confined in plantation camps, often far away from home."[16] The excerpt echoes the 'colonial ecological violence' that has eliminated indigenous ecologies, which are to be replaced with new ecological practices that have culminated in the devaluation of plants and the knowledge they bear. This monopolization of vegetal beings draws attention to the ecological crisis that it unfolds, which, Vandana Shiva rightly observes in her seminal work *Agroecology*

11 Barad, *Intra-actions*, 81.
12 Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, 34.
13 Ibid., 43.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 17.
16 Ibid., 32.

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and Regenerative Agriculture (2022), "displaces diversity and destroys biodiversity's ecological services and functions—thereby eroding natural and social capital."[17]

Further, Gagliano substantiates the agential potential of plants to learn, respond and remember with the example of the Mimosa pudica plant, also known as 'the sentient plant,' 'the action plant' and most recently 'the intelligent plant.' Gagliano chooses the Mimosa plant for the experiment as it dismantles the bridge between the animal and the vegetal world in the conventional sense of the term, wherein the former equates to sensitivity while the latter to insensitivity. She then asks a curious question, which is, "Could Mimosa truly learn from new experiences and flexibly alter her behavior?"[18] She conducts the experiment and records the responses of the Mimosa plant in five separate acts. What unfolds is unexpected: without a brain or a nervous system, the Mimosa plant is able to remember, thus breaking the convention. This demonstrates that the objectification of plants not only prevents an extensive study of plant behavior, including plant intelligence, their agency and also raises significant ethical concerns regarding human-plant relationships. Therefore, foregrounding the agency of the nonhuman emerging through their intra-actions is necessary for multispecies flourishing, living with response-ability, and attending to, rather than denying, the power differences.

Monica Gagliano's *Thus Spoke the Plant*, in addition to being an empirical narrative, is also an ecopolitical form of protest against the silencing of the agency of the plants. The book narrates an episode where the author develops a relationship with the spirit of an oak tree, that invites the author to tell their stories, emphasizing the significance of nonhuman storytelling practices. Haraway enunciates: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."[19] The excerpt highlights the relevance of storytelling practices and what we choose to foreground as they iteratively re/configure the way we perceive and interact with the world. Our stories could either reinforce the prevailing structures of dominance or challenge them, serving as a catalyst for producing alternative knowledge systems. On a similar note, Barad argues, "which practices we enact matter—in both senses of the word. Making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather, it is about making

17 Vandana Shiva, *Agroecology & Regenerative Agriculture: Sustainable Solutions for Hunger, Poverty, and Climate Change*, (London: Synergetic Press, 2022), 26.

18 Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, 64.

19 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (London: Duke University Press), 2016, 12.

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specific worldly configurations."[20] Therefore, it is high time that we foreground the stories of earthly agencies, which could be bracketed within what Haraway calls 'multispecies storytelling practices' that are premised upon recuperating the planet.

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20 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum and the Entanglement of Matter and* Meaning, (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 91.

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A Bad Patch of Agrilogistics: *Polysaccharides* [*Cukry złożone*] by Szymon Szwarc

Abstract
Putting to work the theories of Karen Barad and Timothy Morton, the author of the article investigates the volume *Polysaccharides* (2020) by Szymon Szwarc. The Polish poet, like Barad, notices the connections and entanglements between various actors of the world. The portrayal of these connections serves him as the basis for a poetic critique of "agrilogistics," which, according to Morton, has been a perpetual pattern of human activity since the Neolithic Revolution. The author of the article analyzes these issues, especially with regard to the poem *Boiler Broad Bean.* He comes to the conclusion that Szwarc develops his own consideration regarding agrilogistics, which is close to new materialism.
Keywords: Szymon Szwarc, new materialism, Polish poetry, Karen Barad, agrilogistics

Intra-duction

One of the most apparent traits of Szymon Szwarc's poetry is its inaccessibility. What we struggle with while reading his texts is a weird undecidability between an aphorism and a giggle, between thoroughgoing intellectualism and exaggerated camp. Putting to work the thought of Karen Barad, who, alongside Timothy Morton, will serve me as a main co-thinker in this essay, we could say that in Szwarc's poetry, sententious tones and mockery are cut together-apart, meaning entangled and differentiated in one move.[1] I do not use this term figuratively since cutting together-apart is the work of matter/ing, of matter that matters. In Szwarc's case, matter/ing takes the form of the specific metric procedures that fill the poems to the brim with (self-)irony. I would like to propose that their hermetic, riddle-like structure can be understood as a kind of "ecognosis" – a form of ecological consciousness that is aware of the weirdness and strangeness of the world of which we are a part. The term was coined by Morton who explains that ecognosis is:

1 Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–87.

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> a riddle. […] It is something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation. Ecognosis is like a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop – a *weird* knowing. *Weird* from the Old Norse *urth*, meaning twisted, *in a loop*.[2]

There is a striking analogy between Morton's and Szwarc's taste for strange figures. Interestingly enough, they both use them to *literally* accustom us *to strange figures* – human, non-human, in/animated entities that elude our cognitive and affective capacities but at the same time capture us within a loop of coexistence. For Morton, one result of ecognosis is simply laughter: "The world it discovers is nonsensical, yet perfectly logical, and that is funny."[3] The same goes, I will try to prove, for Szwarc's trickster-ish poetry. If it is nonsensical, this is not without reason, so to speak. So, let me take a closer look at the volume *Polysaccharides* [*Cukry złożone*] from 2020.

Becoming-Molecular

The volume *Polysaccharides* consists mainly of long poems stretched across several pages, with regularly (almost recursively) returning topics, threads, and phrases, often quite absurd, matched by free associations, phonetic similarities, or cryptic puns. These associations link not only verses or parts of particular poems, but they also "jump" between different poems, creating entanglements and mutations between them. For example, the word "Boiler" from the poem *Boiler Broad Bean* can be found in a different context, in the question "What is the Boiler?" from the poem #, which, in turn, sends us back to *Snake's Egg* where we read "What is the cat?"; the poem under the incipit "I WANTED to protest" finds its reverse in the poem under the incipit "I WANTED to stroll," etc.

One can say that, in doing so, these small, "elemental" bits act on a molecular level like "jumping genes": discovered by Barbara McClintock, these DNA sequences are able to relocate themselves into a different position within a genome, often instigating some mutation on their way. Obviously, this "jumping genes" metaphor only works when we consider the volume to be one entity having one genome. Then again, if we see the subsequent poems as individual beings, another metaphor could refer to the horizontal gene transfer between ecologically interdependent organisms.

Again, these associations are something more than simply figures of speech. Taking a deeper dive into Barad's thought, I would say that the recursive bonds

2 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

3 Ibid., 110.

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between different texts are one signal of an iterative "spacetimemattering." As Barad explains, spacetimemattering – the inseparability of time, space, and matter, but also the ongoing, meaningful relationalities among moments, places, and things –

> *is not a set of static points, coordinates of a void, but a dynamism of* différancing. […] agential realism understands the very nature of matter and the very matter of nature as (iteratively re-)constituted through a(n iteratively reconfigured) multiplicity of force relations.[4]

Szwarc's spacetimemattering takes a specific molecular form, and this is how we can approach the title of the volume. The structure of the long poems bears a striking resemblance to polysaccharide chains. One feature of the latter is that, on the one hand, their linkages are provisional and unstable. In compliance with relational ontology, they are constantly moving, ready to enter the subsequent intra-actions[5] as if incorporating, on a molecular level, the quantum, unending in/determinacy. Szwarc re-enacts such in/determinacy by means of many kinds of specific ruptures: enjambments that completely change the meaning of particular lines (or, indeed, make it un/decidable), catachrestic, ill-grounded metaphors, ellipses, links between phrases that do not fit together, or sequels to poems that never had their prequels. On the other hand, however, despite their unstable nature, polysaccharides are resilient to breakdown, especially those bonded by *beta*-linkages (hydrogen bonds providing them with mechanical strength). In Szwarc's poems, the role of such linkages is played by the already mentioned iterative repetitions that jump from text to text, riveting their structure.

What is the role of all these intricate measures? Like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Szwarc seems to be in favor of "becoming-molecular", which replaces (or, rather, is constantly replacing) individual subjectivity with the affective, intensive multitude, especially given that, as the French philosophers claim, the undecidability of becoming-molecular has an anti-capitalist potential: "Every struggle is a function of all of these undecidable

4 Karen Barad, "No Small Matter: Mushrooms Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetimemattering," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Tsing et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 110.

5 For Barad, intra-actions are something completely different from inter-actions. The assumption behind the latter is that they always occur between the already existing particles or entities, whereas quantum physics would have us think that there is no such thing as separate phenomena. The entities are only established by intra-actions: "Intra-actions are practices of making a difference, of cutting together-apart entangling-differentiating (one move) in the making of phenomena. Phenomena – entanglements of matter/ing across spacetimes – are not in the world, but *of* the world" (Karen Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity; VIrtuality; Justice / Was Ist Das MaB Des Nichts? Unendlichkeit, Vlitualitat, Gerechtigkeit* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 7–8.)

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propositions and constructs *revolutionary connections* in opposition to the *conjugations of the axiomatic*."[6]

In favor of this anti-capitalist interpretation, we can add that the polysaccharides are colloquially considered "good" saccharides, as opposed to "bad" monosaccharides that are easily digestible and high in calories, often coming from highly processed food. In this regard, simple sugars can be read as a metonymy for the capitalist regime that increases work (and consumption) performance by changing the lifeworld, whereas polysaccharides (usually found in fruits and vegetables) mark not only a shift toward a non-human perspective but also a discreet manifesto of political veganism.

To conclude the part about the form of Szwarc's poems, I propose that he abandons the paradigm of re-flection, which is the way of situating the subject outside the world, by introducing an ontology of separate entities and a pattern of re-presentation. Instead, he acknowledges his own diffractive position that forces him to speak *from* the world or to literally *interfere* with the world. The concept of a diffractive methodology, introduced by Barad in her *Meeting the Universe Halfway*,[7] is also explained in her conversation with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin as

> a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement.[8]

A diffractive methodology is not about some vague "entanglements" but specific, contingent intra-actions. In Szwarc's case – and this is my final hypothesis – we are involved in the late effects of agrilogistics. According to Morton, agrilogistics is a long-standing pattern of the human enterprise that, since the Neolithic Revolution, forces human beings to domesticate the non-human world, overvalue binary thinking along with the Culture/Nature split, introduce social hierarchization, etc. It is important to notice that these processes are inseparable. The "moment" humans became sedentary cultivators, a profound shift in state was instigated, and in the catastrophic time of the Anthropocene, we experience the late consequences of it.[9]

6 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 473.

7 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 71–94.

8 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, "Interview with Karen Barad," in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 50.

9 See: Morton, *Dark Ecology*.

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Bitter Sweet Synchrony

Let us take a look at several poems from *Polysaccharides*, keeping in mind that, in doing so, we inevitably break the linkages between them.

It is worth starting with the opening and closing poems that serve as a frame story, implying that the rest of the poems (intra-actions, no doubt) situate themselves within this framework:

> THE LIGHT they had
> was only to be paid for[10]
>
> GOODNIGHT, the light
> goes out for an undefined
> purpose.
>
> It's nice here, and it's not
> really needed
> to look around.
>
> And that would just be
> nothing at all.
> Just nothing anymore.
> (*CZ*, 49)

The first text is a fine example of Szwarc's quasi-aphoristic inclinations. One obvious reading would be that the light here is a metonymy for the Enlightenment, for which "they" – we – have to pay the double price: first, one that imposes the need to shoulder the responsibility for independent thinking on the coming-of-age humans; second, the human disconnection from the living world that has been instigated by the Age of Reason. Here, the light begins to diffract, for, as Andrzej Marzec reminds us, playing both with Kant and Donna Haraway, the idea of *sapere aude* means that we neither make kin nor recognize kinship with the more-than-human world.[11] The modern constitution (to use Bruno Latour's term[12]), instead of "making kin," introduces a fixed subject-object binarism in which it tries to purify our world from all the "translations." And, ironically enough, this is where "the light" begins to feel like the light pollution that conceals our entanglements with non-human agents. Since the Anthropocene marks the moment when we, along with the rest of the more-than-human world, finally see the consequences of that split, it is about time to pay the price.

10 Szymon Szwarc, *Cukry złożone* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2020), 5. Cited henceforth as *CZ*. All Szwarc's poems are quoted in my translations from Polish.

11 Andrzej Marzec, *Antropocień. Filozofia i estetyka po końcu świata* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2021), 41.

12 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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As a result, a specter of decadence haunts us. Noticed by some critics in Szwarc's *Polysaccharides*,[13] it does not, however, take the form of the common apocalyptic thinking. If Szwarc says "goodnight," as in the closing poem, it is a farewell to the light (perhaps the light of modernity) and, as implied by the enjambment, to the world as a modern, all-too-human construct.[14] If the light goes out without any particular reason, it is because the end of the world means (among other things) the end of teleology, which is nothing at all like the apocalypse:

> This end is precisely not an instant vaporization, but rather a lingering coexistence with strange strangers. For the end of the world is the end of endings, the end of telos, and the beginning of an uncertain, hesitating futurality.[15]

I would argue that Szwarc's thinking moves pretty much in the same direction. One trigger of his version of uncertainty is the contradictive phrase "It's nice here, and it's not." It is as if we found ourselves in a superposition of many pasts, presents, and futures. Firstly, there is some hesitating futurality to this line anticipated by the enjambment (and the result of enjambment as a device often resembles, in Szwarc's case, "the mutually exclusive conditions of im/possibility" of quantum physics[16]). Secondly, the superposition of time means that it is still relatively nice here, at least in the Global North, because the end of the world extends itself in time. At the same time, the end of the world, as Morton would have it, "has already occurred" because the emergence of the Anthropocene has caused a shift in the state of Earth's systems: the deep future is already here, and it is rather more appalling than appealing.[17]

Yet, there is some un/decidable futurality. When Szwarc un-fixes the expression "that would be all," changing it into "that would be nothing at all," it is another sign of decadence (yes, "our world" comes to an end, whatever it means). But this very decadence is dismissed by the literal meaning: as if "nothing" situated itself at the bottom of "all." In fact, according to Barad's interpretation of quantum physics, nothingness is far from being empty. Literally, there is a *thing*

13 Jakub Skurtys, "Wasteland," *ArtPapier*, no. 19 (2020), http://www.artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=402&artykul=8085.

14 Note that in Polish, "world" and "light" – *świat* and *światło* – are very close.

15 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 95.

16 Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 5.

17 No matter where we nail the "Golden Spike" marking the beginning of the Anthropocene, it is a past that has never ended, for example, the moment 8:15, September 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima (see: Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable," in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes and David Wood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); Monika Rogowska-Stangret, *Być ze świata. Cztery eseje o etyce posthumanistycznej* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2021).

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in the middle of no-thing-ness: "The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be."[18] Moreover, the quantum im/possibility of nothingness questions the very law of non-contradiction which, according to Morton, is one of the three axioms of agrilogistics.[19] So, decadence and futurality haunt us at the same time. They are cut together-apart.

One poem that takes on that hesitating futurality is *Hey Flower* where Szwarc's subject is caught up in a weird intra-action with a plant. It is weird because all the signs point to the fact that it should not flourish in a current state of late-capitalist affairs:

> Why are you growing, flower,
> when the soil from which you had,
>
> let's say, the guarantee lies
> intoxicated, stimulating nothing
>
> particular? Besides, the unfavorable
> settings in the air, water,
>
> and the commitment at almost every
> level make you
>
> fully entitled to feel
> cropped out?
>
> What kind of success you'd like to achieve?
> What are you trying to prove?
> (*CZ*, 42)

The human subject is amazed by the flower's ability to grow in barren, intoxicated soil. At the same time, in posing a question to the flower, Szwarc points toward the "weirdness" Morton relates to ecological awareness: the awareness that something is constantly missing in our thinking of ecological interdependence. We do not see all the connections, all the entanglements. And this is because we, along with every other being, co-exist in a loop:

> Ecological awareness is weird: it has a twisted, looping form. […] Ecological awareness is a loop because human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops. And ultimately this is because to exist at all is to assume the form of a loop. The loop form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing.[20]

18 Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 13.
19 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 47.
20 Ibid., 6.

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Once again, it is a weird coincidence that Szwarc loops his poems, activating recursive, iterative repetitions of certain phrases and threads. These operations certainly affect the hermeneutical incomprehensibility of his texts, exactly like the positive and negative feedback loops in Earth's climate that elicit the cognitive and affective "scalar dissonance" of the Anthropocene[21] – yet another way to formally hint at ecological issues outside the scope of representation.

Meanwhile, the flower is growing. What is noteworthy here is that it takes place despite the economic rhetoric that dominates the poem: warranty, stimulation, commitment, entitlement, and, last but by no means least, being "cropped out." The latter phrase indicates that, for Szwarc, capitalist agriculture is an important factor behind wiping out the entanglements of life forms.[22] The flower is "cropped out" because it has to make space for monocultural crops. In other words, "the interest at almost every level" is strictly connected to agrilogistics, which started 12,000 years ago but accelerated in the modern era along with the introduction of capitalist industrial agriculture. Let me follow this *beaten* track since it looms large in the long, complex poem *Boiler Broad Bean* (*CZ*, 10–12).

1. Un/doing of Agrilogistics

The poem starts like this:

> Then think about the bottomless sky that you weren't
> able to scent.
>
> That it is exactly the sky that will capture everything and will keep
> capturing, and that it will be
>
> death which will work its way there. On the side, amid laughter,
> meters, he, filled up like an old clunker.
>
> As if it did chance.

From the very beginning, we find ourselves entrapped in the middle of a strange loop. Since the piece begins with the word "then," something must have happened before. Maybe it is only a reference to the previous poem that ends with the line "Eat a grenade in honor of what's-his-name" (*CZ*, 9) (which may imply that the name under investigation is "Boiler Broad Bean"). Maybe we are in the

21 See: Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville-London: Univeristy of Virginia Press, 2017).

22 In Barad's terms, capitalism "erases" the entanglements, as if it dealt with a completely empty void (deprived of all the fluctuations of virtual particles – something they discuss under the rubric of "quantum eraser") that only waits to be filled with crops (see: Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 310–17).

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aftermath of an important event, perhaps the extinction event. That second suggestion finds its confirmation in what follows. The sky appears to be bottomless (like a bottomless sink for the greenhouse gases it captures and accumulates)[23] because we are not able to scent it, meaning: to feel it, to acknowledge its importance.

Let me recall that, according to Morton, one of the functions of agrilogistics is to "eliminate fear, anxiety, and contradiction […] by establishing thin rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds and by reducing existence to sheer quantity."[24] Hence, the laughter (frivolousness? ignorance?) and meter (economic measure? scientific data?) are incorporated into the poem *literally* out of nowhere. But, it turns out, the sky actually exists and will continue to exist (religious connotations with infinity might play a role here) despite the death lurking there, like the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which implies the sixth mass extinction caused by global warming. The closing line sounds peculiar and is hard to unpack, except for the expression "it did chance" by which we can understand that, from the beginning, agrilogistics has been a hazardous enterprise, missing the fact that everything in the world happens *by chance* and that it is impossible to eliminate contradictions and fear.

In the second part, we move into the deep past:

> He was only doing. Confirming the shift of the forms. He didn't know what the crop was. What is
>
> a loop. …
>
> I will be you. Having exhausted the deposits, humanity then posits to take from the bed made by its old man,
>
> its old man is Broad Bean.

The first thing we should note is that in Polish, "broad bean" (*bób*) is very close to "God" (*Bóg*), and maybe that is why Szwarc writes it in capital letters, calling it the "old man" of humanity – an obvious periphrasis for God. There is a good reason for this. Broad bean was already grown in the Neolith and is not found in the wild. It has been strictly domesticated as early as in the Neolithic Revolution, the moment of the birth of humanity as we know it. What is more, we know neither the origins of the plant as such nor the etymological roots of its name. This obscurity is a clear sign of the agrilogistic oblivion of coexistence with other beings.

23 Perhaps Szwarc plays here with the collocation "crass stupidity" which translates into Polish as "bottomless stupidity." If the association is correct, then we might read it as a phraseological neologism based on the replacement of one of the elements. One implication would be that it is bottomlessly stupid to think that the sky is bottomless.

24 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 43.

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Here the connection between "broad bean" and "God" (between cultivation and cult) becomes more noticeable for the beginning of cultivation also initiated the institutional religions that, in turn, reinforced social hierarchization and state violence. The Neolithic Revolution was the main factor behind the new social arrangements instituting patriarchalism, private property, and the state with its monopoly on violence, all of which were supported by different forms of religious faith. That "moment" of the establishment of agrilogistics has never ended. It has been looped and diffracted. We still live within the confinements of this singularity.[25]

Importantly, before the Broad Bean, man was not subjected to that loop, and he did not know what the crop was. Szwarc treats that diffracted establishment of agrilogistics as a defining moment for humanity as we know it. Now, taking a small step across a few thousand years, he deals with the late consequences. The phrase "I will be you" could mean that "we are all in this together," like in the clichéd slogan for the Anthropocene, but also, in a more post-human manner, an outcry for the re-connection between humans and non-humans. The reading we privilege notwithstanding, we face yet another defining moment where agrilogistics begins to eat its own tail (note that the Ouroboros is one of the images Morton uses in his thinking). When all the so-called externalities have been exhausted (on both sides of the system – the "natural resources" on the input, the dumping sites on the output), we turn to the unconventional resources, only exacerbating the trouble we are in (one possible meaning of the idiom "make one's bed") – not to mention that we certainly do not want to stay with the trouble, as Haraway would advise.[26] Instead, in a desperately modern manner, we are constantly purifying:

> How many him or times is that, as a spirit
> or you,
>
> he curses the ground that he weeded out, watered
> and organized
>
> for the sake of nothing but losses? Causing joy to the sky
> that takes the piss of stock market boom,
>
> son: everything at a knockdown.

The passage continues with the biblical imagery, hinting at God's words from Genesis: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it." It is worth mentioning that for some anthropologists, the biblical

25 See: Barad, "No Small Matter."

26 Donna J. Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 34–76.

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myth of the fall from Eden is a narrative about the Neolithic Revolution and the related transition from hunting and gathering to sedentism.[27] Opposing the dominant view, they claim this transition radically decreased humans' quality of life, instead privileging quantity. That is why, for Morton, the third axiom of agrilogistics goes as follows: "Existing is always better than any quality of existing,"[28] which is clearly a very problematic line when we consider the structural causes of overpopulation in the Global South or the terrible living conditions of the so-called livestock.

So, despite the gargantuan structure of human enterprise, it results only in losses. Here, the contrast between the ground and the sky enters the picture. Additionally, the sky is weirdly anthropomorphic. One possible explanation would be that the sky is a metonymy for an evil demiurge who is happy about human failure. Then again, that demiurge himself is only a figure for the process Haraway calls "the astralization": the civilizing efforts to ignore the chthonic powers by establishing astralized gods[29] or, as Morton would say, to exclude undomesticated life forms that are not part of an agrilogistic project.[30] Thus, the joy of the sky Szwarc writes about is an ironic play with astralized agrilogistics, so to speak. The irony continues with the mocking of the language of economy. Commonly, the stock market boom is associated with astralized images (get something off the ground, the sky is the limit, etc.), whereas what is going on *down there* are multiple knockdowns.

Finally, the word "son" appears to be less out-of-context. According to anthropocentric religions, we are all the sons of God. Whether we like it or not, we are all heirs of the Neolithic Revolution. Hence, the ill-formed question "How many him," as if we were all the "Anthropos" of the Anthropocene, incarnating itself from generation to generation over the last 12,000 years. It is rather a critique of the abstract discourse of the Anthropocene on Szwarc's part than it is an expression of his approval of it since, as we read in the next paragraph: "Once upon a time, the world was being created, the business got off the ground, / and the tornado as well […]." Still with religious connotations in the background, we can say it is not about the world Barad has in mind when she speaks of "being *of* the world." It is about being-in-the-world as a function of agrilogistics: "The very concept of 'world' as the temporality region suffused with human destiny emerges from agrilogistic functioning. World, as Heidegger knew, is *normative:* the concept works if some beings have it and some don't."[31] Only when we think

27 Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York-London: Routledge, 2003).
28 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 47.
29 Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble," 48.
30 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 47.
31 Ibid., 46.

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in such terms can we get the business off the ground, thus disrupting some entanglements in favor of others and, by the same token, instigating another loop, this time represented by the tornado.

> Now, think once again about the body out of work:
> its transportation
>
> to the gardens becomes more and more efficient,
> you make your way with it through bad crops
>
> you carry it like vaccinated burgers, farcing for marching,
> marsh in which you'll multiply your species and gain.
> With an isotonic drink as a keynote,
> you'll finally ask:
>
> is there a Broad Bean?

There are further references to agrilogistics in this fragment albeit set in a different context, as if we moved once again from the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution to its late consequences. I suggest this part of Szwarc's poem handles the capitalist industrial livestock production. In other words, the body here is the animal flesh. While in terms of the actual physical work it is incredibly productive, it may be called "out of work" since, within the capitalist political economy, its labor remains unpaid, as if it was a "free gift" from nature. At the same time, capital's "success" hinges on animal flesh at least as a source of cheap proteins that increase the efficiency of the work labor and, as a consequence, make people richer.

Szwarc disrupts this capitalist view by means of two disconcerting phrases: "vaccinated burgers" (maybe an allusion to the usage of antibiotics in factory farming) and "farcing for marching" (maybe a prediction of climate wars in which humans will themselves become the flesh they eat, as in the expression "cannon fodder"). Conceivably, Szwarc's association with the isotonic drink as a *keynote* derives from this point. If factory farming is only possible when we ignore crucial entanglements in the world, Szwarc brings us back to the molecular level where the solution is isotonic only when dynamic osmosis occurs in the concentration of moles. So, at least metaphorically, it resembles the dynamic balance of ecosystems of the traditional ecology or, more up-to-speed with contemporary thought, the sympoietic systems Haraway advocates for.[32] From that perspective, it makes perfect sense to ask whether there is a Broad Bean (God) or only an all-too-human, hyper-tonic idea, sucking the life out of the world? Still, the ambiguity remains since the isotonic *drink* rings more a con-

32 Haraway, "Staying with Trouble."

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sumerist than a molecular bell. It almost literally works like a *pharmakon*, a molecular medication and a consumerist poison at the same time.

Finally, the second word of the title, "Boiler," becomes less incomprehensible. It is hard to make a decisive point about its usage, but we can at least say that it is relatively close to the word for broiler chicken, especially given that "boiler" and "broiler' are weirdly entangled in a different, crucial sense. A boiler as a device provides either power (in a steam engine, which connects it to the Industrial Revolution) or heating, exactly like a broiler that is bred and raised as a cheap source of energy but (if used as a metonymy for the whole factory farming) is also the main factor behind global warming.[33] So, while the connection between "boiler" and "broiler" may be a bit shaky (and, certainly, not as strong as the entanglement between "broad bean" and "God"), I believe the last part of Szwarc's poem makes perfect use of it:

> Now, think about the aim: its shift becomes
> systematic,
>
> its old man has been getting hot like boiler, has been getting old
> and cold like a cheap boiler
>
> its old man is a boiler filled with marsh, an exhausted
> deposit in which you'll grub
>
> off your shares, and when you go over to something more
> frugal, you'll ask again:
>
> when did Broad Bean exist?
> When did Boiler exist?

The beginning and the end of agrilogistics compress into an indeterminate superposition. The original aim of eliminating fear and contradiction by separating humanity from the rest of the living world appears to be impossible to achieve. Moreover, its so-called side effects instigate a state shift in planetary living conditions. It becomes systematic because, as we know, multiple feedback loops render climate change nonlinear so what we are facing with the climate catastrophe is not simply constant warming but rather a shift towards the "planetary *terra incognita*."[34] Perhaps this is the reason for the contradictory phrase from the second verse: the old man of humanity (we no longer know if it is a Broad Bean or a Boiler since they are intra-connected) has been getting hot (because

33 Robert Goodland and Jeff Anhang, "Livestock and Climate Change," *World Watch*, November/December 2009, https://awellfedworld.org/wp-content/uploads/Livestock-Climate-Change-Anhang-Goodland.pdf; IPCC, "Special Report: Climate Change and Land," 2019, https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/.

34 Paul Crutzen, Will Steffen and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?," *Ambio* 8, no. 36 (2007): 614.

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global warming *does* progress) *and* cold (because the exhausted boiler of the capitalist regime can no longer operate in the shifting conditions).

Here, the fact that the boiler is "cheap" and that the "marsh" from the previous part has jumped into this closing excerpt might be meaningful. Broiler chickens are certainly paradigmatic examples of "Cheap Nature"[35] deprived of its non-quantitative features. It is no exaggeration to call chicken meat produced on an industrial scale junk food, which is one possible association that comes to mind along with the word "marsh." For the last time, Szwarc plays for high stakes with the language of economy. Grubbing in the exhausted deposits for unconventional fossil fuels or for the more and more difficult to extract minerals is compared to the loss of shares – not necessarily market shares, but everything humans share with more-than-human non/living beings.

However, at this point, something weirdly positive emerges. Having exhausted all the shares, the "you" Szwarc talks to will turn to something more frugal. The final questions mark a transition into the deep future (which may as well be the deep past) deprived of the astralized gods, where Broad Bean and Boiler are un/done.

2. Wrapping (Agrilogistics) Up

The poem *Boiler Broad Bean* is a material-discursive diffraction (rather than a representation) of the long shadow of agrilogistics ranging across the geological scale. Much like Morton and Barad, Szwarc acknowledges that we are entrapped within this "hyperobject,"[36] in the midst of these planetary entanglements. Therefore, he would agree that the distinction between "micro" and "macro" is "a line in the sand,"[37] although he uses the language of molecular biology instead of quantum physics, so perhaps better words here would be "the molar" and "the molecular" from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus.*[38]

Nevertheless, the scalar dissonance of the Anthropocene is a fact that the mainstream political and economic discourse is still trying to erase with a kind of "pseudo-quantum eraser," ignoring – at its (and our) own peril – the entanglements we are in. As Barad says, "Attempts at erasure always leave material traces: what is erased is preserved in the entanglements, in the diffraction patterns of being/becoming."[39] Since Szwarc hints at many of those "material traces" in

35 Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).
36 Morton, *Hyperobjects.*
37 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 214.
38 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus.*
39 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 229.

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Polysaccharides, in his own manner, he embodies Barad's practice of the "un/doing of time" and "re-membering," inverting the tracks of agrilogistics and becoming a member of something else. Becoming-molecular means, in his case, reintroducing ourselves into a more-than-human community. So, if the necessary practice of agrilogistics is to part and parcel, Szwarc is convinced that agrilogistics does not have to be part and parcel of the world of which we are part.

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Beate Sommerfeld (Adam Mickiewicz-University Poznań)

Diffracted landscapes, decentered agencies – photography as a tool of 'mattering' in the novels of Esther Kinsky, Franz Friedrich and Michel Houellebecq

Abstract
Following Donna J. Haraway and Karen Barad's concept of diffraction and Barad's thought model of agential realism, the paper investigates the diffractive practices of photography, as staged in literary texts. In the novels *By the River* (2014) by Esther Kinsky, *The titmouses of Uusimaa don't sing any more* (2014) by Franz Friedrich, and *Map and Territory* (2010) by Michel Houellebecq, a 'mattering' of nature is performed that, through diffraction and intra-actions within the photographic apparatus, questions an anthropocentric worldview and resists the representational claims of photography in favor of an ontology of radical posthuman performativity.
Keywords: diffraction, agential realism, Karen Barad, photography, mattering

In the following, in line with Karen Barad's concept of agential realism,[1] I will examine the possibilities of operationalizing neo-materialist concepts of agentiality for media studies. I will attempt to answer the question of whether Barad's key concepts such as diffraction, apparatus, and intra-action can be used to reconceptualize visual media and contribute to a post-humanist, non-anthropocentric understanding of photography. The area of the photographic image (still and in motion) will be examined in the novels of Esther Kinsky (*By the River*, 2014), Franz Friedrich (*The titmouses of Uusimaa don't sing any more*, 2014) and Michel Houellebecq (*Map and Territory*, 2010).

1 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs. Journal of Woman in Culture and Society*, 28, no 3 (2013): 801–31; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

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Barad's agential realist framework

My approach is guided by Barad's assumptions of diffraction, introduced as a part of their concept of 'agential realism'. The notion of diffraction, derived from quantum physics, describes the bending and spreading of waves that occurs when they encounter an obstruction and the way waves combine when they overlap, producing diffraction or interference patterns.[2] Prior to Barad, Donna Haraway uses the optical metaphor of diffraction and interference as an epistemological metaphor, to reveal irreducible differences in the world.[3] Diffraction, therefore, counters the prevailing constructs of representationalism and identity; whereas reflection is bound to "repeating the Sacred Image of the Same," diffraction patterns "record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference."[4] With Barad, the physics of diffraction not only forces us to reconsider what an entity is 'in its essence' but to re-think the entire distribution of subject and object, knower and known, whose relation can no longer be described as one of a distant and disentangled gaze but an entanglement: "We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because we are part of the world."[5] Barad understands diffraction as "a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inherent separability of subject and object."[6] Unlike reflection, diffractive practices aim to understand the world from within, they emphasize the material experience, which means that material objects and encounters are produced and reshaped through what Barad calls 'intra-action'.

Barad's agential realism, the onto-episto-ethical framework, in which she locates her practice of diffraction, highlights the fundamentally entangled nature of reality and the ontological inseparability of objects (the realm of matter) from subjects (the realm of meaning). The notion of intra-action describes the entangled nature of these relationships that does not presume the pre-existence of individual entities but rather phenomena brought about through the processes of measuring, observing and knowing. According to agential realism, these are material practices of intra-acting within and as part of the material world.[7] They have a performative dimension and are involved in the ongoing reconfiguration of the world. Phenomena acquire determinacy through agential cuts from which result the distinctions between subject and object, human and non-human etc. Agential cuts are made in apparatuses, which, for Barad, mean not only ex-

2 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 74–80.
3 Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium.FemaleMan q_Meets_ OncoMouse TM* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 16.
4 Ibid., 273.
5 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 829.
6 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 381.
7 Ibid., 90.

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perimental arrangements of technical instruments but also material-discursive arrangements producing phenomena. Apparatuses are thereby "boundary-drawing practices,"[8] which execute 'agential cuts', but they are also entanglements of observer, technical instruments and the studied matter, involving "specific intra-actions of humans and nonhumans,"[9] each of which is granted agency. Phenomena thus mark the epistemological entanglement of the observer and the observed and "the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components."[10] Through diffraction, the subject itself appears as an intra-acting phenomenon within the material-discursive entanglement of a post-human world in its becoming; it is a "part of the intra-active ongoing articulation of the world in its differential mattering."[11]

Shaped by their concept of intra-action, Barad's agential realism suggests a post-anthropocentric and performative re-thinking of agency, which is thought to facilitate possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements, as a dynamism of forces[12] in which all 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting. According to Barad, agency cannot be said to be an attribute of subjects or objects; rather, it "a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity."[13] In Barad's agential realism, agency refers to a world in perpetual movement or in an ongoing re-figuration; it is substance in its intra-active becoming, "not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency."[14] Matter, therefore, is "a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity,"[15] and apparatuses are "material-discursive practices – causal intra-actions through which matter is iteratively and differentially articulated, reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities and impossibilities in the ongoing dynamics of intra-activity that is agency."[16]

Diffraction and photography

It seems promising to consider photography from a diffractive methodological position. In a narrow sense, photography is based on a techno-optical apparatus that is bound to observe and know the world around us. In a broader Baradian

8 Ibid., 140.
9 Ibid., 171.
10 Ibid., 33.
11 Ibid., 381.
12 Ibid., 141.
13 Ibid., 235.
14 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 822.
15 Ibid.
16 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 170.

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sense, photography can be regarded as a material-discursive arrangement that is onto-epistemologically entangled, and as such, it seems to privilege representation. Photographs are usually seen as representational images, reinforcing a representationalist system of knowing the world. The indexical character of photographs means that photographs necessarily index something that 'was before the camera'.[17] Reflection also works both literally and metaphorically within photography. Cameras use mirrors, and photographs are relied upon to provide evidence of the things we encounter – they serve as mirrors of the world. Photographs as reflection of reality ensure that representationalism and its mechanisms of opposition and division endure. Moreover, photographs reflect an anthropocentric world view since they are designed for human comprehensibility and narrowed down to the human senses. For Daniel Rubinstein, the message of photography is that human vision is the universal mode of access to reality, and it can therefore be regarded as the remnant of an obsolete anthropocentrism.[18] Photographic pictures reflect the world as ours to observe and control – they guarantee a rational worldview and position the human subject as powerful and sovereign. Photography imposes the human, distant and disentangled gaze on the world and locates the subject in a position of mastery. For Rubinstein, it is about being centered on the human as such, which motivates the demand for a posthumanist theory of images.

A posthumanist understanding of photographic images does not refer to images 'after humans', but rather brings into play a materialistic, non-representationalist approach. It defies, as Vilém Flusser asserts, the representational apparatus of photography[19] and implies that new ways of knowing the world can be found when it is expanded to the agency of all components. Photographic images are co-produced in distributed agency between human and non-human material actors that comprise the photographer, the photographic instruments and materials as well as the subject matter, which correlates with Barad's concept of the apparatus as one that includes all elements as having agency. A material engagement with photography reveals the apparatus by which it operates and highlights the constitutive roles the various components of this apparatus embody. With Barad, "apparatuses are specific material reconfigurations of the world/"[20] Like any other Baradian apparatus, the photographic apparatus consists of a specific reconfiguring of photographer, camera, subject matter and

17 Margaret Iversen, "Following Pieces: On Performative Photography," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 104.

18 Daniel Rubinstein, "Posthuman Photography," in *The Evolution of the Image. Political Action and Digital Self*, eds. Marco Bohr, Basia Sliwinska (New York: Routledge, 2018), 100–101.

19 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, transl. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), 82.

20 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 142.

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other technical and human agents involved in the production of the images through which we understand the world. Photographs can thus be conceptualized as an intra-active event created within complex material-discursive settings, which can be described as an interference pattern. So, against the inherent anthropocentrism of photography, Barad's agential realism provides arguments for a less anthropocentric perspective.

In an agential realist account of photography, the photographer does not stand in a relation of externality to the world. Following Barad's framework, a diffractive approach to photography means, instead, understanding the process of 'taking a photograph' as a performance of 'intra-action' whereby camera, object and photographer are in an entangled state of becoming – rather than an interaction between the (pre-existing) world and camera guided by the photographer. This approach draws on Barad's mode of 'performativity', which encompasses a "moving away from the familiar habits and seductions of representationalism (reflecting on the world from outside) to a way of understanding the world from within and as part of it."[21] It is a knowing that "does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a direct material engagement with the world."[22] Barad's notion of performativity and diffraction thus offers a way to a re-thinking of photography that acknowledges practices of knowing/observing as a specific material involvement that participates in (re)configuring the world.[23]

Hence, it appears worthwhile to discuss diffraction as a methodology for a re-conceptualization of photography that withstands the externality of representationalism. Applying diffractional thinking to photography means accepting that the human-photography relationship is not one of separation but one of entanglement, which challenges the representational claims of photography. Situating the photographer, subject-matter and camera in an ongoing process of reconfiguring (or becoming) opens up possibilities for pulling apart binary concepts, such as nature/culture or animate/inanimate, which are anchored the system of representation. Also, as a physical phenomenon, diffraction offers a methodology for a re-thinking of photography that goes beyond representationalism. When focused through the aperture, light waves interact with the edge of the hole causing it to spread out. Light waves can also interfere, producing diffractive patterns. Photographic images – because of their physico-material structure – are therefore directly connected to physical diffraction. To understand photographs as diffractions, as patterns of difference is a way to resist the

21 Ibid., 88.
22 Ibid., 49.
23 Ibid., 91.

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representational apparatus of photography – to "play against the camera," as Flusser puts it.[24]

In the following, I will consider photography in the novels of Kinsky, Friedrich and Houellebecq from a diffractive perspective, investigating diffractive practices performed in the texts.

Esther Kinsky: *By the river*

In her autobiographic novel *By the river* (Am Fluss) from 2014, Esther Kinsky reports about her life in the suburbs of London. Photography is a key motif of the book. Kinsky not only writes about photographic practices, but the text is also illustrated by the author's own photographs, taken during her nomadic wanderings through the suburban scenery. Kinsky's pictures already reveal the diffractive potential of photography through the choice of the subject matter. They are taken far away from the city, but yet not fully from within nature; hence, what emerges is an in-between zone, which reveals the fuzzy edges of nature and human civilization, entangled with each another.

Her photographs are all about the erasing of boundaries – between nature and culture, subject and object, human and non-human. Kinsky struggles with the constitutive and active role of the photographic apparatus as a border-drawing practice. When the photographer takes pictures of a willow grove with its meandering paths, we read: "I looked, examined, photographed the willow trees from all sides, from a distance and close up, and couldn't find a name for what I found so beautiful about it. In the photographs it seemed to me the symbol of a border that I did not know for a long time what it separated from what."[25] For Kinsky, apparently, photography is not only a technical instrument but a material-discursive arrangement; her images reveal the 'agential cuts' effectuated by the apparatus, its border-drawing function, which is at the same time staged and undermined by the text.

Moreover, the text unfolds a diffractive interplay with the representational apparatus. In her photographs, there is hardly any recognizable subject matter, and if there is, it is of no representational value. The images are disentangled with any indexical relationship, and so it is hard to know what they are 'about': "There wasn't much to see in the photos. Bent grids in which stuck the jagged shards of a

24 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 80.

25 Esther Kinsky, *Am Fluss* (Berlin: Matthes &Seitz, 2014), 88–89: "Ich betrachtete, musterte, fotografierte das Weidengehölz von allen Seiten, aus der Ferne und der Nähe, und fand keinen Namen für das, was ich daran so schön fand. Auf den Fotografien erschien es mir als das Wahrzeichen einer Grenze, von der ich lange nicht wußte, was sie wovon schied." (All translations in the text, unless otherwise noted, are mine, BS)

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broken window, a sharp shadow across the picture, chipped plaster, under which all the layers of painting became visible. Nothing is reported anymore, everything is left to itself."[26] By withholding apparent meaning from the viewer, Kinsky's photographs avoid representational interpretation; they are fragmentary, decontextualized and opaque. The images, however, are not a chaotic distribution of elements but an entanglement – a structure where sense is so thickly condensed that no signification can be extracted from it and where all elements are constantly exchanging and diffracting. By diffracting the landscape, the photographs not only operate out of the reach of any identification but mark a move towards performativity: "Everything is left to itself" – matter is left to its 'mattering', its intra-active becoming, which is its agency.

In Kinsky's novel, we can observe a shift from exploring photographic methods of representation to its material conditions, which emphasizes photography in its materiality. The author goes back to the outdated, "simple constructions"[27] of photomechanical media, and explores their diffractive potential. When she experiments with photographical devices such as the pinhole camera, diffraction is dealt with as an optical phenomenon. A pinhole camera uses diffraction, which occurs around the aperture edge; the very tiny hole creates diffraction patterns by affecting the light waves. The author explains these effects: "On calm days, the recordings are like fine drawing, she said. And sometimes they show angels."[28] Diffractive practices are, here, a 'playing against' the representational apparatus of the camera. The interference patterns produced by the pinhole-camera go beyond the reflection of the same: they develop a performative dimension by letting phenomena brought about through the apparatus, and which emerge from the intra-action of photographer, subject matter and camera, appear. Kinsky's protagonist therefore "believed in the pinhole camera" for "all sorts of wonderful sounding phenomena that were possible with this device. Reproductions of images, uncovering of the invisible."[29]

Kinsky's practice of photography can be described as the merging of image production with the principles of a diffractive methodology as espoused by Barad and Haraway – photographing diffractively. The aspects of diffractive photography include disparity in subject matter, dismantling of singular perspectives,

26 Ibid., 43–44: "Auf den Fotos war nicht viel zu sehen. Verbogene Gitter, in denen die gezackten Scherben der herausgebrochenen Fenster stecken, ein scharfer Schatten quer durch ein Bild, abgeplatzter Putz, unter dem alte Schichten der Bemalung ans Licht kamen. Nichts ist mehr ausgewiesen, alles sich selbst überlassen."

27 Ibid., 48: "einfache Vorrichtung."

28 Ibid.: "An windstillen Tagen werden die Aufnahmen wie feine Zeichnungen, sagte sie. Und manchmal zeigen sie Engel."

29 Ibid., 48–49: "glaubte an die Lochkamera"; "alle möglichen wundersamen Erscheinungen, die mit dieser Vorrichtung möglich waren. Vervielfältigungen von Bildern, Zutagebringen von Unsichtbarem."

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distortion and performativity. The diffraction of the environment in Kinsky's pictures enables photographic encounters with the matter of nature itself.

Franz Friedrich: *The titmouses of Uusimaa don't sing anymore*

A corresponding material engagement with photography can be noted in Franz Friedrich's novel *The titmouses of Uusimaa don't sing anymore*. In the rise of the digital era, the author advocates analogue media and insists on their inherent materiality. Whereas the digital image exists only as volatile data material, in analogue photography and film it is materially present and can be grasped as an entity: "He could see every picture, that was the material. He could stop the projector and take out the film. He could run his fingers along the perforation on the edge of the tape and inhale the specific smell. It was the material that mattered."[30] Friedrich draws on the genesis of the photographic image, which requires a material basis. Photography is the result of a physical imprint that is transferred to a light-sensitive surface; the analogue image is therefore a material practice, "light banned by dust and chemistry."[31]

In Friedrich's novel, materials and photography techniques exist as blurry vectors in relation to each other; they are intra-acting agencies performing a shift from representation to its material conditions. In order to undo the "repetition of the Sacred Image of the Same,"[32] Friedrich interrupts the conventional functioning of the camera and disorients its standard way of 'seeing': "The film began with a camera drive along a wall of the wood. Instead of an opening with aerial photographs of coastlines, as was common in nature documentaries, the camera followed the grain of the treas. A lake landscape was created from cracks, rings and veins."[33] Through the use of a low camera angle, the distant and anthropocentric gaze on the world imposed by photography is dismantled in favor of a maximal closeness to the subject matter. The reality and centering effects of the photomechanical media are thus subverted: as in Kinsky's novel, the landscape is decomposed and distorted – it falls apart into dispersed elements and emerges anew through the intra-actions within the photographic apparatus.

30 Franz Friedrich, *Die Meisen von Uusimaa singen nicht mehr* (Frankfurt / Main: Fischer, 2014), 12–13: "Jedes Bild konnte er sehen, das war das Material. Er konnte den Projektor anhalten und den Film herausnehmen. Er konnte mit seinen Fingern die Perforation am Rande des Bandes nachfahren und den spezifischen Geruch einatmen. Auf das Material kam es an."

31 Ibid., 13: "Licht gebannt durch Staub und Chemie."

32 Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, 273.

33 Friedrich, *Die Meisen von Uusimaa*, 10: "Der Film begann mit einer Fahrt entlang einer Wandvertäfelung aus Holz. Anstelle einer Eröffnung mit Luftaufnahmen von Küstenlinien, wie sie in Naturdokumentationen üblich war, folgte die Kamera der Maserung der Bretter. Aus Rissen, Ringen und Adern entstand eine Seenlandschaft."

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In Friedrich's narrative, the diffractive potential of photography is repeatedly explored through close-ups:

> I tried again with the telephoto lens. […] My gaze sank deeper and moved so close to the blades of grass, tansy stalks, and mossy root protrusions that I began to imagine my gaze bringing forth the sound of breaking branches. I filmed along the undergrowth of the forest floor, until I finally let the camera come to rest in front of a pot-bellied mushroom with an ink-blue head that enchanted me.[34]

The telephoto lens brings details into the picture that only become visible through the apparatus. The entanglement of the human eye and the optical device marks a material engagement with photography as well as performativity; nature is not given as a fixed entity but arises from diffractive practices. Similarly to Kinsky's novel, a 'mattering' of nature is performed that is based on an intra-action of camera, subject matter and photographer, which are in an entangled state of becoming. The diffractive practices carried out in Friedrich's narrative thus involve both a step towards performativity and a shift to an understanding of the world from within and as part of it. In this way, defying the anthropocentric gaze on nature, photography is not limited to a purely automatic mechanical process, but appears as an apparatus – a complex articulation between the mechanical, the material and the discursive.

Michel Houellebecq: *Map and Territory*

An evolvement beyond the limitations of a purely representational understanding of photography, which eventually leads to a 'mattering' of the natural world, can also be found in Michel Houellebecq's *Map and Territory*. The protagonist, the photographer Jed Martin, pursues the project of an "artistic representation of the world,"[35] which begins with photographing industrial objects in order to accomplish an exhaustive representation of the industrial area. Martin's predilection for industrially manufactured objects is grounded on their seriality, which reflects the mastering of matter by human agents, and his reluctance to photograph natural objects is explained by the uncontrollability of organic matter: "There are those irregularities of organic nature, […] it is a bit

34 Ibid., 139: "Ich versuchte es noch einmal mit dem Teleobjektiv. […] Mein Blick sank tiefer und schob sich so dicht an Grashalmen, Rainfarnstengeln und bemoosten Wurzelvorsprüngen vorbei, dass ich mir vorzustellen begann, mein Schauen würde das Geräusch brechender Zweige erzeugen. Ich filmte am Gestrüpp des Waldbodens entlang, bis ich die Kamera schließlich vor einem dickbäuchigen Pilz zur Ruhe kommen ließ, der mich mit seinem tintenblauen Hut in den Bann zog."

35 Michel Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 9: "[…] une représentation artistique du monde".

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daunting."[36] The obsession for photographic representations of material items goes hand in hand with a fetishization of the camera, which he appreciates as an outcome of technologic rationality: "It was obvious that rationality was the core of the camera."[37]

Martin's fascination for apparatuses, which safeguard a rational and anthropocentric worldview, explains his enchantment by maps. His next project encompasses a series of photographs taken of maps, cartographic representations of landscapes intended for human vision, that make the world an object of a distant and sovereign human gaze and transforming it into a territory. But the apparatus develops its own agency and reveals the diffractive potentiality of photography. The vertical perspective enforced by the map merges with the almost horizontal angle of the camera; the photographic images overlap with the maps creating interference patterns. The apparatus thus engenders a peripheral gaze that decenters the superior, godlike perspective on the territory, and the anthropocentric view from the outside is diffracted by an insight involving the viewer. Lines of demarcation are blurred, restoring the indeterminacy of the landscape as a phenomenon shaped by the intra-action of photographer, optical tool and subject matter. The territory diffracted by the photographic medium appears "like a dreamland, magical and inviolable."[38]

The diffraction of the environment, which creates new insights and engages the photographer, is pursued in Martin's next project, a series of close-ups of plants. As in Friedrich's novel, the gaze mediated by the camera creates a greater closeness to nature than human perception can provide and brings details into the picture that are only visible through the apparatus. Through the entanglement of the human eye, camera and object, the photographer's vision takes new directions and his awareness of the surrounding matter starts diffracting. The installations that follow are montages and crossfades of close-ups of plants, whose growth and fading are captured by extended exposures – plants are thus assigned a lifespan. We literally 'see' the activity of matter that dissolves boundaries by intra-action, and plant life appears as a living actor, inextricably entangled with the human. The subject behind the camera is part of the "vibrant matter,"[39] it participates in the rhythms of the natural world and is involved in a process of becoming.

The configurations of the apparatus that follow now also shape intensive zones of becoming. By means of filmic montages and long exposure, interference patterns are created that merge the rampant growth of the vegetation with de-

36 Ibid., 165: "Il y a ces irrégularités d'origine organique, […]. C'est un peu décourageant."
37 Ibid., 159: "Il était visible qu'un optimisme raisonné avait présidé à la conception du produit."
38 Ibid., 63: "[…] comme un territoire de rêve, féerique et inviolable."
39 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant matter. A political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), X.

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caying industrial objects: "The industrial objects seem to be deteriorating, gradually being covered and displaced by the layers of vegetation."[40] Through these "entanglements of spacetimematterings,"[41] plant matter is granted an agency that finally dominates that of humans. By overlaying images combined with long exposure, Martin's installations represent the attempt to adopt the "perspective of the vegetation on the world,"[42] which has replaced human agentiality – this is where the novel ends: "The triumph of the vegetation is total."[43] By embracing the point of view of plants, the images subvert an anthropocentric worldview; a decentering movement is inscribed within them, which predestines them for a posthumanist contextualization.

Houellebecq's novel unfolds an aesthetic of the posthuman as a post-anthropocentric proliferation of life forms and stages a decentered agency that includes plants and inorganic objects. Agency is re-thought here as "a matter of intra-acting"[44] that contributes to the reconfiguration of our understanding of the world. Overlapped images create diffractive interference patterns that undermine agential cuts and dismantle binaries such as nature/culture or animate/nanimate entrenched within the system of representation. The photographic apparatuses installed in the novel enable the entanglement of human and nonhuman agents to emerge and open up visual areas that transcend the human perspective. The distributed agentiality of the apparatus thereby holds a non-anthropocentric potential. As Rubinstein states: "photography confronts the eye with images that emerge at the limit of representation, questioning the supremacy of human vision and the claims of representationalism for objectivity and realism."[45]

By seeking possibilities for disrupting the representationalist functioning of photography, Martin's diffractive camera work unsettles our predetermined system of knowing the world. It also unveils the material agentiality of the posthuman apparatus of which the photographer is a part. The human-photography relationship is one of entanglement, which involves a material engagement as well as performativity; corresponding to a diffractive approach in the context of Barad's agential realism, photography is revealed as a performance of 'intra-action' whereby camera, object and photographer are in an entangled state of becoming. The photographer is not an outside observer, but part of the

40 Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, 411: "Les objets industriels semblent se noyer, progressivement submergés par la prolifération des couches végétales."
41 Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity (The authorized version)," Kvinder, Køn & Forskning (Women, Gender & Research) 1–2 (2012), 47.
42 Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, 409: "[…] le point de vue végétale sur le monde."
43 Ibid., 414: "Le triomphe de la végétation est total."
44 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 178.
45 Rubinstein, "Posthuman Photography," 102.

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world in its ongoing intra-activity; he is not a causal force upon but is deeply interwoven with nature, which is not immediately given to the eye, but – as in Kinsky's and Friedrich's novels – emerges through diffractive practices. Houellebecq's narrative thus brings forth what Barad calls the 'queer performativity of nature';[46] It offers a posthumanist understanding of performativity that challenges the positioning of matter as either a given or a mere effect of human agency[47] and thinks matter as self-assembling sets of interrelations. At the same time, it asks us to acknowledge that "we are part of that nature that we seek to understand."[48]

Concluding remarks

My diffractive reading of the novels (one through the other) has considered the diffractive dimensions of photography revealed in literary texts. The discussed examples show that photography can be diffractive, that is, go beyond a representation of the world from the outside and bring forth the entanglement of photographer, camera and subject matter, evidencing the epistemological inseparability of subject and object, observer and observed. In the examined novels, photography functions in terms of 'intra-action' and 'diffraction' instead of identity and representation. Kinsky's, Friedrich's and Houellebecq's texts undo the reflection of the same by a diffractive 'playing against' the camera and display photographs that open up possibilities of a world seen, experienced and known differently. What Jean-François Lyotard demands for the photographer, therefore, also applies within these texts: "learning how to see is unlearning how to recognise."[49]

The examined novels challenge the representationalism inherent in photography; they foster different kinds of knowledge that do not rely upon externality and representing but on a "material engagement with the world"[50] and are based on intra-actions and entanglements. In Kinsky's, Friedrich's and Houellebecq's narratives, there are no pre-existing entities called 'humans' or 'nature'; rather, both emerge from the functioning of the apparatus as a part of the ongoing reconfiguring of the world. Diffractive photography, therefore, includes a move from representation and identity to an ontology of radical performativity. In an agential realist account, the photographic image appears as an intra-active event

46 Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 25.
47 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 183.
48 Ibid., 26.
49 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, transl. Antony Hudek, Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 153.
50 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 49.

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co-produced within the multifaceted material-discursive settings of the apparatus, through which the world is iteratively and differentially articulated.

Tracing the diffractive poetics unfolded in literary texts reveals literature as a performative medium for revising the apparatuses that determine our encounters with the world in which we live. The optical devices in the investigated novels are apparatuses in a Baradian sense: material-discursive activities that diffract an anthropocentric worldview and embrace the concern of posthuman approaches, demanding equal consideration of the agency of matter and destabilizing the human subject and his dominant position over nature and others. By looking at the world through the lens of a camera, the novels suggest a re-thinking of agency from a post-anthropocentric perspective and bring into play a posthuman agency based on intra-actions in a continuous reconfiguring of matter and meaning. Not only do they show the co-emergence of both, but "affirm that it is always possible to materially intervene in the world's becoming by interfering with existing representations."[51]

A materialist take on photography unveils the differential articulations and reconfigurations of matter in the ongoing dynamics of intra-activity that is agency. Photography thus becomes a tool of 'mattering' as a never-ending "process of iterative intra-activity."[52] The apparatuses in the novels of Kinsky, Friedrich and Houellebecq are therefore "open-ended practices" since – as Barad states – "the reconfiguring of the world continues without end. Matter's dynamism is inexhaustible, exuberant, and prolific."[53]

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51 Frederica Timeto, *Diffractive Technospace: A Feminist Approach to the Mediations of Space and Representation* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2016), 5.

52 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 210.

53 Ibid., 170.

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II. Non-Human Animal Agency

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Neighbours in a pot – familiar and weird agency of Darwin's worms

Abstract
Charles Darwin's open enthusiasm concerning the blurring of an animal-human as well as a plant-animal border is particularly inspiring for posthuman or eco-critical rethinking of human-nonhuman relations. In *Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*, he presents earthworms as beings whose "small agency" is substantial to all earthly living as well as the preservation of cultural material heritage. This vision is lined with weirdness and the grotesque, linked not only to the confusion of high and low order, but also to the discovery of a close relationship between human identity and animal agency that somehow resists rational conceptualization (Bradshaw 2020). Worms described by Darwin demand appreciation and care, a kind of "worm politics" or ethics (Bennett 2010, Meijer 2019), particularly in the age of the Anthropocene marked by a sudden awareness of "weird" entanglements of previously separate orders (Morton 2016).
Keywords: Charles Darwin, earthworms, weird, Anthropocene, agency

That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm
(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Conqueror Worm*)

Darwin's "backstage chuckle"

Posthumanism, by decentring the human position, tends to bring our focus to non-humans, understood as active and conscious actors equipped with their own particular point of view. In doing so, posthumanism allows a certain weirdness or even the grotesque nature of our condition to come forth. It seems that even if we are inclined to think according to posthumanist terms, there is still the basic difficulty of applying them to our self-knowledge. How can we properly recognize and understand the myriads of different intersections, relations, and co-dependences with creatures we usually can't even see? How can we really acknowledge them as crucial co-creators of our shared world?

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I want to ask these questions alongside Charles Darwin's *Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*[1] (later referred to as *Worms*). Darwin enthusiastically blurs the human-animal border: he is always ready to point out yet another example of animals' abilities and to criticize human *hybris*. *Worms*, however, is perhaps his most "proto-posthumanist" work in which he proves our strict dependency on the earthworms, who constantly devour, digest and thus fertilize the soil: "Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first suppose."[2] Darwinian worms represent subjects that can be easily disregarded and overlooked, yet, when noticed, are potentially unsettling not only because they are presented as surprisingly active, but also because they call for acknowledging agency that is both fundamental and "weak." Darwin, at the beginning of the book, warns never to ignore "small agencies" such as worms.[3] In his argument, those agencies, insignificant at first glance because they are performed by creatures playing the cultural role of "mere worms," can amount to grand effects:

> In almost all humid countries they are extraordinarily numerous, and for their size possess great muscular power. In many parts of England a weight of more than ten tons […] of dry earth annually passes through their body and is brought to the surface of each acre of land; so that the whole superficial bed of vegetable mould passes through their bodies in the course of every few years.[4]

Earthworms arise to be the closest and most faithful human companions (for example, their castings can help preserve ancient heritage). Darwin mingles high- and low-level orders: thought, culture, heritage and materiality, digestion, defecation. In doing so he evokes the realms of the grotesque and weird accompanying our (post-)human being in the world.

Jonathan Smith in *Charles Darwin and the Victorian Visual Culture* quotes Ruskin's commentary on an anonymous text employing a Darwinian worldview: "He gave descriptions of walking trees, and rooted beasts; of flesh-eating flowers, and mud-eating worms; of sensitive leaves, and insensitive persons; and concludes triumphantly that nobody could say what a plant was, or what a person was."[5] Surprising agency of the simplest or even immobile living can, in turn, affect human self-knowledge – it is as if nothing is certain and safe anymore; our identity itself is at stake. Familiarity with the natural world is replaced by a certain

1 Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observations on Their Habits*, (London: John Murray, 1882), John van Wyhe, ed. 2002 – *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online* (http://darwin-online.org.uk).
2 Ibid., 308.
3 Ibid., 2.
4 Ibid., 322.
5 Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 167.

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weirdness. Weird, as Mark Fisher writes, is preoccupied with "the strange": "The strange – not the horrific. The allure that the weird and the eerie possesses is not captured by the idea that we 'enjoy what scares us'. It has rather to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond the standard perception, cognition and experience."[6] Ruskin reacts to this newly discovered world of non-human agency with horror and rejection, Darwin with constant delight and wonder.

Such a vision culminates in his work on earthworms, or, more precisely, on the strange and hidden – both in a symbolic and literal sense – connections between man's culture and earthworms' activity and earthworms' great merits for the whole of terrestrial life itself. Incidentally, it can also serve as a fantastic example of Darwin's tender and scrupulous attention as a researcher who is always prepared to observe, check, and note every possible aspect of the investigated subject.

Earthworms are humble creatures: blind, deaf, dumb, living in the earth, devouring it and then defecating it. Of course, such a description, though accurate, is far from the just one, Darwin would say. Worms are endowed with consciousness, some level of intelligence and most certainly have culinary preferences. More importantly, however, their activity shapes the face of earth as we know it. Worms deal with products of death and decay; they transform them into the *vegetable mould*, a foundation of organic life. What is more, ancient buildings and monuments are preserved by the same worms, as Darwin proves. Human achievements suddenly may seem far less impressive from that point of view. As Jonathan Smith writes:

> Worms have played an important part in the natural and human history of the world, in a sense making human culture possible. Yet their preservation of ancient monuments is as inadvertent as their creation and aeration of soil. Darwin does not ridicule human high culture here – his laughter at the role of worms in history is a backstage chuckle – but his delight in worms and their achievements is palpable.[7]

Humans – contrary to the worm – can discover their place in the universe; they can formulate rights of nature to which they are subjected, and in doing so, transcend them. Earthworms simply digest: they simply *live*. Yet, our superiority over the natural world is not so obvious. After all, humans are closely intertwined in relations with others, and are still one of many animal species. As George Levine observes, Darwin's praise of human achievements is weakened by his constant marvel about even the "lowest" forms of life: "The true wonder, as one

6 Mark Fisher, *The Weird And The Eerie*, (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 8.
7 Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian*, 252.

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feels in Darwin, is the wonder of nature itself […]."[8] Authors analysing *Worms* show apparent delight in Darwin's vision, in the fact that minor, sometimes rendered "disgusting," creatures are presented as intelligent, dutiful little workers and that man is finally put in his place. Darwin's subtle "backstage chuckle" can also be shared because it is not only worms who make inadvertent changes in the world, but also humans who do so (and sadly, with horrid effects as the present situation shows).

Darwin's scientific and rational explanation of relations between earthworms, the structure of the soil, flora and archaeological monuments and artefacts paradoxically helps us to acknowledge the world, which seems to elude the same scientific and rational insight. The complexity of nature is both within and without our intellectual grasp. While we may agree that worms play a crucial part in the world's history, there is a sense of weirdness, of the grotesque, lurking just around the corner. The most important and crucial activity of worms is their excretion/defecation of the mouldy castings – a process that, at first glance, stands in stark contrast to human culture.

As Smith and Donald Ulin notice, Darwin's *Worms* is filled with Bakhtinian grotesque realism.[9] Bakhtin, in his analysis of Rabelais' language, speaks of the material, bodily lower stratum. The grotesque world embraces inverted hierarchies where all high, spiritual values are of material, "impure," physical descent. Affirmation of bodily fluids, of defecation, of decay, carries an ambivalent meaning in the grotesque as it also gestures towards the new, the reborn: towards life. The grotesque world, then, is a merry one; it is a world of constant change where every value is fluid and where every state of being can and will be transformed into the other. There is no escaping from materiality and the body, death and decay, but there is a peculiar kind of consolation present here: one that speaks of constant change.

On human ignorance

Aaron Bradshaw, in his article *Accessing Microbial Lifeworlds*,[10] writes on weirdness evoked by the theory of endosymbiosis and the discovery of our (or, more precisely all forms of life's) dependency on microbes. Microbiology can be seen as *weird* because its findings force us to acknowledge the fact that our

8 George Levine *Darwin Loves you. Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 67.

9 Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian*, 249–50, Donald Ulin, "A Clerisy of Worms in Darwin's Inverted World," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (spring, 1992): 303–4.

10 Aaron Bradshaw, "Accesing Microbial Lifeworlds. Weid Entanglements and Strange Symbionts," *PULSE: The Journal of Science and Culture*, vol. 7 (2020).

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humanity is based and essentially related to a realm of non-humanity represented by organisms that we can't even see without the aid of technical apparatuses. Donna Haraway remarks enthusiastically: "I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such […]."[11] The same kind of wonder about blurring the human-non-human border can be found in Darwin's writings, but, as Bradshaw rightly states, this wonder is not free from the recognition of strangeness, the *weirdness* of our own condition. This is a weirdness of a particular kind, for in this case we cannot say that microbial agency is something completely external – something alien: "this finding also fails to leave 'homely', in this case our bodies, intact, but irrevocably alters it, making even homely alien, foreign, strange."[12] Because realms of "familiarity" and "strangeness" are, in this case, entangled and interconnected, the term "weird" is better suited than the semantically close "uncanny" or *unheimlich:* "both occupy part of the same object, with no clear line dividing the two – 'familiarity' and 'strangeness' were both sensations generated by the illusion of being a separate, sovereign agent."[13] Not only is it that humans cannot be seen as "separate and sovereign," our relations with microbes are not symmetrical, since the symbiotic coexistence of higher organisms and microbes is contingent on microbial pre-existence. Bradshaw refers to Nigel Clarke and Myra Hird's stance in this regard: "the asymmetry of our relations with microbes, then, extends, beyond the biological dependence […]: it is an ontological and epistemological asymmetry in which precise details of microbial existence recede even further from understanding."[14]

Darwin's vision of the earthworm-human relation evokes similar problems. This relation is not symmetrical (it seems that worms do much more for the world existence than man), but also – when we analyse the narration of the book – it is more explicitly based on an analogy between worm's and man's agency. (Of course, the scale of worms' activity is enabled by microbial agency, which Darwin could not have taken into account[15]). Similar to the case of microbial agency, this fact is difficult to conceptualize and is followed not only by weirdness and the grotesque but also comicality.

11 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.
12 Bradshaw, "Accesing Microbial," 10.
13 Ibid., 3.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Christian Feller, George G. Brown, Eric Blanchart, Pierre Deleporte, and Sergey S. Chernyanskii, "Charles Darwin, earthworms, and the natural sciences: various lessons from past to future," *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, 99 (2003): 33.

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Much of the weirdness evoked by "small agencies" or small things/creatures' agencies comes from a certain surprise accompanying their discover. In *Worms* we deal not only with worms' emotions, intelligence, digestion and castings but also with human ignorance – people (represented, for example, by farmers and archaeologists) are unaware that they move, dwell and work in a space previously prepared, ploughed and evened by *someone* else. We read for example:

> Archaeologists are probably not aware how much they owe to worms for preservation of many ancient objects,[16]

and:

> Farmers in England are well aware that objects of all kinds, left in the surface of pasture-land, after a time disappear, or, as they say, work themselves downwards. How powdered lime, cinders and heavy stones, can work down, and at the same rate, through the matted roots of a grass-covered surface, is a question which has probably never occurred to them.[17]

Darwin is the one who can observe nature with sufficient skill and knowledge, not only registering events as they present themselves but also relentlessly offering explanations and enquiring into causes and relations. As Adam Philips writes: "Through our overlooking we have mistaken an origin. When it comes to the surface of certain bits of earth, we have been using the wrong language about beginnings. […] Darwin wants to justify the ways of worms to Man."[18] Archaeologists and farmers as representatives of "humans," preoccupied with their own affairs, do not need to know exactly "how things really are" in order to function well, – all the more so because the agency of earthworms, although ultimately impressive and fundamental, is carried out extremely discreetly, and the animals themselves, in order to learn anything about their habits, need to be watched closely and for a long time (and preferably placed in a pot). Darwin, on the other hand, seems to suggest that earthworms carry out activities analogous to the work of farmers and archaeologists. We read: "The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions: but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed and in fact still continues to be thus ploughed by earthworms."[19] They take care of the soil/earth surface, clearing it from larger stones; they "take care" of ancient heritage (or contribute to its erosion). In carrying out their seemingly uncomplicated tasks, they decide how the past will reach future generations of explorers – what will remain preserved.

16 Darwin, *The Formation*, 192.
17 Ibid., 150–51.
18 Adam Philips, *Darwin's worms. On life stories and death stories*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 47.
19 Darwin, *The Formation*, 316.

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Jonathan Smith suggests that Darwin was aware of his nearing death when writing *Worms* – aware that soon his body will become yet another material to be devoured and so tirelessly digested by earthworms: "Confronting his own death, Darwin celebrated the worms that would devour him."[20] Adam Philips also links worms with the basic activities of Darwin: "work and digestion – and the links between them – were to dominate Darwin's life."[21]

As Bradshaw notes, knowledge of the mutual entanglements of human and non-human realms is hard to conceptualize and frame into a coherent narrative. We are not dealing here with a simple gesture of scientific "disenchantment" with the world, which would simply consist in the discovery of some hitherto unknown natural facts. This is because, in this newly described world in which the agency of small invertebrates influences geological structures, it is necessary to include humans, too – that is, our own strict relations with a primarily strange non-human realm. The agency of microbes differs from that of earthworms in that it carries the potential for a uniquely unsettling strangeness that involves stripping humans of their autonomous agency and locating within themselves a non-human one that is both close and impossible to control. Earthworms remain, in the literal sense, outside of us – they can be easily tracked, spotted, placed in a pot and observed. At the same time, they are the ones who let the world pass through them – they are situated outside, but this "outside" has been digested by them.

Worm politics and hospitality

Examples of Darwinian worms can help to emphasize the tension between the attitude oriented towards an individual perspective of a singular creature and the relational/posthumanist one, which points not so much to the individuality but rather the relational mode of being understood as a basis for later individuation. Instinctively, one might say, we could link earthworms with the realm of material, active plurality rather than with the domain of traditional, closed, conscious subjectivity ascribed in the first place to humans.

A posthumanist perspective provokes the question concerning the value of individual perspective since we are all products of some external, unintentional processes (be they of an evolutionary, biological, material, social, etc. nature). The individual subject endowed with a personal perspective, a history, plans, and abilities is disseminated by a plurality of networks, webs, and rhizomes linking many different actants and others, human and non-human alike. And while we may be glad to force human/western hubris out of our self-knowledge, enabled by

20 Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian*, 275.
21 Philips, *Darwin's worms*, 44.

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this theoretical position, there is still the question of its consequences first in the area of animal studies and then with regard to the question of non-human beings' status as such.

Eva Meijer, in her *When Animals speak*,[22] offers a synopsis of the discussion on "worm politics," drawing from Darwin, Bruno Latour (who in *Pandora's Hope*[23] describes the impact of worms' activity on the distribution of trees in the Amazon rainforest) to Jane Bennett. The latter in *Vibrant Matter*[24] considers the possibilities and conditions of such ecological politics or political ecologies that will encompass human and nonhuman actants alike: "[…] it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogenous) 'public' coalescing around a problem."[25]

Nonhuman actants need not only be recognized as vital members of an ecological polity, but we also need to exercise our caution, apparatuses, technologies to respond to their "outbreaks, objections, […], propositions."[26]

Meijer argues that Bennett's stance of "vital materialism" doesn't offer a sufficiently satisfactory basis through which to understand ecological politics, or, more precisely, worm politics. In her view, the mere conclusion that worms', just like humans', activities have power to move things around, to shape things, to initiate change in the environment, is not enough to include them in political theory – to see their activity as political. To do this, we need, firstly, to analyse the power relations between earthworms and humans (for example, in the laboratory or in fieldwork, where, according to a Foucauldian stance, we always deal with power-knowledge relations). Interestingly enough, both authors refer to Darwin's anthropomorphic descriptions of worms' capabilities with visible sympathy, and rightly so: as Meijer writes, current research on these animals indicates their capacity for and tendency towards cooperation, social behaviours, some level of sensitivity to pain and so on.

For Meijer, who engages with animal rights discourse, it is of the utmost importance – it is vital to recognize non-humans or certain nonhumans as sentient. The agency/vitality of materiality presented by, say, storm lightning or a hurricane is, in this argument, something essentially different from the agency of worms. She goes on to postulate that worm politics should be grounded in the

22 Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak. Towards an Interspecies Democracy*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

23 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

24 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

25 Ibid., 108.

26 Ibid.

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question of justice – and, in fact, does not stray too far from Bennett's (maybe too laconic) postulate to listen to our nonhuman companions or, as Meijer writes(reaching to Ralph Acampora term), neighbours.

Caroline Hovanec, considering practices of vermicomposting, states that worms are unique masters of hospitality, which is so important in the Anthropocene, a time that requires a new mode of being in the world based on responsibility and awareness. We – humans and worms– can serve each other, accompany each other, without even being aware of our mutual dependence. Such relations are a special case of Harawayan companion species meeting at the shared table:

> There is no clear host or guest in this relationship; there is no shared table, for the worms stay in their bin and the humans eat separately; there is not even a common meal […]. Yet there is an ethics of hospitality happening when people live with earthworms. Each gives – food scraps, compost – and each receives, but asymmetrically, and not in a process of contractual economic exchange.[27]

Darwin's *Worms*, for sure, clearly shows that we are not playing the role of host in the world, even if we let ourselves falsely believe that we are. Sebastian Abrahamson and Filippo Bertoni write that the practice of vermicomposting, where the earthworms are crucial partners, is political as it "involves and brings together multiple different entities and activities."[28] It could be tempting to say that the best form of worm politics would be to simply let them be, to leave them to their own affairs. Earthworms, though intertwined with humans on many levels, do not seek our company; it is us who dig them up, examine and observe them. The responsibility for our shared contacts, then, seems to be upon us. Worm politics is based on curiosity and politeness seen as political virtues, showing such ways of conduct that help to evade the temptation of deciding beforehand on nonhumans needs.

Earthworms crawl on Möbius-shaped, intersecting lines of the "inside" and "outside," "familiar" and "strange." Even when kept in a pot (or a vermicomposting container from which they can escape[29]) and affectionally observed, they hardly classify as a pet. Darwin writes: "As I was led to keep in my study during many months worms in pots filled with earth, I became interested in them, and wish to learn how far they acted consciously, and how much mental power they displayed."[30] Incidentally, there is something specific about observing

27 Caroline Hovanec, "Darwin's Earthworms in the Anthropocene", *Victorian Review* 45, no. 1, spring 2019: 93.

28 Sebastian Abrahamsson and Filippo Bertoni, "Compost Politics: Experimenting with Togetherness in Vermicomposting", *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014), 127.

29 Abrahamsson and Bertoni, "Compost Politics", 132–34.

30 Darwin, *The Formation*, 2–3.

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creatures enclosed in a pot: can we, for example, speak in this case of abuse, of acting against the intentions and interests of earthworms?

Chapters devoted to the relentless study of worms' senses and mental capabilities are fascinating and captivating. The possibility of close contact with animals that are "timid"[31] by nature, dislike light and hide underground allows Darwin to consider them as conscious, endowed with intelligence and certain preferences, for example, culinary likes and dislikes. Earthworms, in order to become Darwin's intelligent worms, had to be held captive.

His argument concerning the consciousness and intellectual capacity of earthworms, moreover, is interestingly formulated: earthworms are first "zoomorphised," that is, compared to higher animals such as rabbits and horses (which also represent "timid" creatures), and only then anthropomorphised. We read:

> Although worms are so remarkably deficient in the several sense-organs this does not necessarily preclude intelligence, as we know from such cases as Laura Bridgman; and we have seen that when their attention is engaged, they neglect impressions to which they would have otherwise attended; and the attention indicates the presence of a mind of some kind.[32]

Laura Bridgman in this argument is not seen as similar to simple invertebrates. Darwin points out that our common judgements on non-human beings are often wrong. Just because we don't know "what it's like to be a bat" it does not mean that a bat is deprived of feeling and thinking. Moreover, according to empirical and sceptic stances, we should agree that our sensory apparatus is not a universally shared basis for perceiving reality.

Darwin's anthropomorphism, though sometimes strikingly faulty according to present methodological standards in ethology, for example, is far from naive. We can compare non-human animals' feelings and behaviours to our own simply because of our animal descent. Considering Darwin's evolutionary thesis, there is no fallacy in anthropomorphic explanation. Paradoxically, such anthropomorphism doesn't necessarily entail anthropocentrism: it serves rather as a means for the most accurate and just description of animals (and plants) and also highlights the existence of continuity across the whole animal kingdom. As Ulin puts it: "Darwinian culture […] always expresses its relationship to its physical/material roots. […]. If Darwin tells us to look to the animals for an explanation of who we are, we must at the same time study our own lives and culture to understand animals or even plants."[33]

31 Ibid., 34.
32 Ibid., 35.
33 Ulin, "A Clerisy of Worms," 302.

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Hovanec writes that Darwin's earthworms fit well with a growing interest in animals that are neglected, "inferior" in terms of organismal complexity or of lower cultural status. Critical animal studies' origins lie in the question of animal suffering and therefore is "naturally" focused on animals used and abused by man, primarily domestic animals. The question of invertebrate consciousness and sentiency seems to be easily disregarded (with the notable exception of cephalopods). They are much more likely to be classified as cartesian *automata*, often presenting wonderful survival mechanisms, social organization or looks, but foremostly being incapable of feeling and without consciousness.

Darwin however, and not only in this work, proves that the origin of such statements can be found in clumsy, biased, non-scientific observation – the world he describes is inhabited with feeling, conscious creatures. Eilleen Crist emphasizes the importance of such an attitude, even if we agree that some of his conclusions about worm intelligence are maybe too enthusiastic:

> his study brilliantly shows that the question of "conscious action" in animals is not inherently problematic: not ontologically problematic because it is not rational to presume, prior to inquiry, that the existence of conscious action is unlikely, even among invertebrates; not epistemologically problematic because once the question of conscious action is allowed to be posed, the scientific imagination finds fascinating ways to address it.[34]

The human observational apparatus, however refined, seems to be insufficient to fully acknowledge the complexity of non-human forms of life. Gillian Beer argues that Darwin was particularly sensitive to the "consciousness of others," ready to trace it even in the most unlikely beings, such as plants: "When Darwin writes of a climbing plant that 'It thus drags itself onwards by an insensibly slow, alternate movement' the 'insensibly' refers to the observer's incapacity to measure the process rather than to any insensibility on the part of the plant."[35] Darwin's scientific imagination is infused with empathy and an ability to be constantly surprised and fascinated by the world, which, in turn, is not a place of peaceful and harmonic cohabitation.

34 Eileen Crist, "The Inner Life of Earthworms: Darwin's Argument and Its Implications" in *The Cognitive Animal. Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition*, ed. Marc Bekoff, Colin Allen, and Gordon M. Burghardt (Cambridge London: A Bradford Book: 2002), 7.

35 Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Elliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 245.

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Ethics, Anthropocene and Humour

Man, Darwin writes, is endowed not only with the highest degree of intellect and rationality but also with sympathy (culminating in the humanitarian treatment of animals). While *Worms* doesn't deal explicitly with the issue of ethical responsibilities of man and ethical consequences of our entanglement in the non-human world, it provokes such questions – and more so in the time of Anthropocene, where our relations with non-humans and Earth are saturated less with awe or surprise and much more with grim recognition of catastrophe.

Earthworms are, of course, also easily classified as Harawayan "chthonic ones": "monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences."[36] Further, her vision of the human understood as a "humus" rather than "Homo," "compost" rather than "posthuman,"[37] agrees with Darwin's *Worms.* Decentring the human position isn't only about changing the actual relations between human and non-human beings, but also the stories we tell about ourselves. After all, Darwin's worms do not cut the ground out from beneath man's feet: they make it possible for dwelling. If we decide to describe some relations or subjects or events as "weird," we must consider the possibility that we are "weird" to others, but also, as Haraway says, that we are surrounded by beings who do not care about humans at all. Weirdness and the grotesque require or entail a suspension of judgment, an instantaneous uncertainty towards not only the status of a stranger but also one's own status. This temporal estrangement (even from one's cognitive schemes) can be seen as an elementary basis for posthuman sensibility.

Timothy Morton writes that our thinking in the era of the Anthropocene should be based on *ecognosis* – a dark ecology that deals with weirdness accompanying present existence. Weirdness is an aesthetic (when it refers to a "strange appearance") as well as an epistemological category (causality is loopy, Morton writes, when the order of the cause and the effect is twisted, entangled). We read: "Yet there is another loop, *a strange loop:* A strange loop in which two levels that appear utterly separate flip into one another. […]. A strange loop is weirdly weird: a turn of events that has an uncanny appearance. […]. The Anthropocene names two levels we usually think are distinct: geology and humanity."[38] It would possibly be too reckless to inscribe Darwin's worms in this weird but yet so near and present order. Still, they accompany our weird, causal

36 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthululcene*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.
37 Ibid., 55.
38 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 7.

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entanglement in the situation of ecological catastrophe, and further still, they mediate between humans and geology.

Humans in the age of the Anthropocene become the mirror image of earthworms. These worms, by devouring and excreting, allow space for life and memory to emerge. Humans, emancipating themselves through culture, technology and, finally, industry from the order of nature, make the Earth an environment that threatens the survival of a multitude of species. It is also increasingly difficult to allow ourselves the luxury of being disgusted by creatures perceived as nasty or "pests," not least because it is our own species that is proving to do the most significant and irreversible damage.

Darwin's *Worms* does not only offer a refreshing and humbling view of humans' place in the world. It may also serve as a valuable lesson of wonder and curiosity that isn't linked to a conviction about one's own indisputable superiority that may accompany a rational, scientific description of the world. The last paragraph of *Worms* can be seen as a (somehow strange) twin reflection of the famous description of the "entangled bank" from *Origin of Species*. There, Darwin proved that only by accepting his evolutionary theory we will be able to fully appreciate and wonder about various relations binding the inhabitants of the "entangled bank": birds, plants, insects and worms. Here we read:

> When we behold, a wide, turf-covered expanse, we should remember that its smoothness, on which so much of its beauty depends, is mainly due to all inequalities having been slowly levelled by worms. It is a marvellous reflection that the whole of the superficial mould over any such expanse has passed and will again pass, every few years through the bodies of worms.[39]

We may safely state that such wonder is not necessarily widely shared, but neither is it, after all, linked with the admiration directed at traditional objects of aesthetic interest. (The delight that comes from an even field is perhaps also related to the fact that Darwin measured the slow progression of stones into the ground by the ease of a horse's gallop through such terrain.[40] Thus, it is not just about visual but also *bodily* delight). The basis of aesthetic delight here is knowledge – science – for the more we know about the world, the more wonders we may perceive. Scientific knowledge here does not isolate one from the world, does not lock one into a sterile laboratory or into the position of an external, objective observer; on the contrary, it intensifies a certain sensitivity to the natural world. It reveals its complexity, often not easy to accept because it is fraught with death and destruction, but infinitely more interesting and amazing than the natural world as hitherto understood. Darwin's narrative is attractive due to the fact that

39 Darwin, *The Formation*, 316.
40 Ibid., 145.

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his scientific explanations do not 'disenchant' the world completely, leaving room for awe and wonder.

Crist writes that Darwin sets an example of scientific courage, one that is expressed in an unbiased and enthusiastic attitude: "what matters is that scientists be allowed and encouraged to pose these questions about worms and other animals. For the erosion of this wonder […] is internally connected to the gathering speed of the human onslaught on the natural world, and to its darkest corollary, the sixth extinction."[41]

I would like however to dwell a bit longer on the unsettling powers of the worm's agency. Darwinian worms test our ability to see our connections, sometimes weird or loopy, as Timothy Morton could say, with the non-human. Still, there is some comic potential in discovering the net that connects us with other creatures and in discovering our own *non-humanity* and proper recognition of the strangeness of the natural world itself.

Ursula Heise in *Imagining Extinction*,[42] after considering the elegiac tone of extinction stories, points to those that are comic. She mentions Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival*.[43] and *Last Chance to See*[44] by Mark Carwardine and Douglas Adams. She writes: "Seen through his [the narrator's] eyes, much of the human world is unpredictable, hard to understand, even harder to control, irrational. So is the natural world, which presents himself as persistently surprising, bizarre, dangerous, beautiful, alien, and difficult to account for in rational terms."[45] Comic narrative speaks – maybe paradoxically, for laughter can be linked with indifference and distance – of hope and of survival. Meeker writes: […] comedy grows from the biological circumstances of life. […]. Comedy demonstrates that humans are durable, although they may be weak, stupid and undignified."[46] The natural world is not only "red in claw and tooth" but filled with – to human onlooker – absurd strategies of survival. Darwin offers a similar narration – much of the amusement accompanying the reading of *Worms* comes from its reversal of orders (the *stronger* human is dependent on the *weak* worm) but also the surprising activity and likeable personality of worms.

Humour, according to Simon Critchley and also Bronislaw Malinowski, is of great anthropological value: it allows us not only to laugh at someone, who seems, for example, to act strange, silly, but also – in turn – to see ourselves as strangers,

41 Crist, "The Inner Life", 8.
42 Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
43 Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival. In Search of an Environmental Ethic*, (Los Angeles: International College Guild of Tutors Press 1980).
44 Douglas Adams, Mark Carwardine, *Last Chance to See*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).
45 Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 51.
46 Meeker, *The Comedy*, 39.

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to notice our customs as weird and our fashion as silly. Simon Critchley states: "humour is a form of critical social anthropology, defamiliarizing the familiar, demythologizing the exotic and inverting the world of common sense. Humour views the world awry, bringing us back to the everyday by estranging us from it."[47]

Anthropology thus interpreted is not confined to a description and research of other cultures. The interpreter's culture should be treated as an equal object of investigation – we should be able to see ourselves through the eyes of strangers. Preferably, the effect is to see ourselves as part of a bigger picture – human beings expressing their experience by cultural means (or, and this will be my point, to see human creatures essentially related and co-dependent on interactions with non-human others). Malinowski writes: "Anthropology is the science of the sense of humour. […]. For to see ourselves as others see us is but the reverse and counterpart of the gift as they really are and as they want to be."[48] Putting aside the problem of seeing anyone as he or she *really is*, I want to stress this peculiar, *strange*, form of communion or re-enactment with the world, that, according to Critchley, humour offers. It is enabled by an estrangement caused by a sudden realization that we are also others to the *others*. We are forced to see ourselves not as independent and foremost rational subjects endowed with the *view from nowhere*, with the power to describe others without being an equal object of someone else's observation or description. The other perceives us outside the limits of our own possible imaginary, emotional and cognitive identification.

Darwin doesn't go so far as to present individual worms as *others*, or even individual separate beings (as he without doubt did when writing on apes, dogs, horses, pheasants, pigeons, and so on). As Philips writes: "one couldn't be sentimental about the earthworms."[49] Still, his worms call for an acknowledgment of their remarkable agency and, as Crist, Hovanec, Bennett and Meijer write, a form of care that is based on respect and responsibility. This task is perhaps easier to practice than to conceptualize. Worms may play the role of the animals that "are good to think with," but only if we simultaneously accept becoming estranged from and entangled in the world.

47 Simon Critchley, *On Humour,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 65.

48 Bronislaw Malinowski, "Anthropology is the Science of the Sense of Humour. An Introduction to Julius Lips' *The savage hits back, or the white man through native eyes", Hau: Journal of Etnographic Theory* 5 (3), 2015 [reprint]: 301.

49 Philips, *Darwin's Worms*, 42.

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Shaping Non-Human Agency: Canine Eugenics and Leon Fradley Whitney's Juvenile Fiction*

Abstract
The article analyzes two juvenile novels by Leon Fradley Whitney, a well-known American eugenicist, who never refuted his affiliation with the eugenics movement. Surprisingly, Whitney's postwar young adult books, written in the boy-and-dog convention, abandon some specific principles of eugenics: prescriptions against miscegenation and the belief in the priority of "blood" over environmental influence. However, the article reads this not as Whitney's attempt at an apology for eugenics but as a logical development in eugenic thought. The article also focuses on the books' extensive exploration of the relationship between genes (breeding) and environmental influence (training) as a genuine attempt at working out the ethical complexities of the technologies applied in the shaping of canine agency, suggesting that this thematic, important for many writers who explore human-animal relationships, has been overlooked by literary criticism.
Keywords: companion species, eugenics, dog training, dog breeding, juvenile fiction

Introduction

The animal turn has brought about much insightful theoretical reflection on literary representations of animal minds and on how fictional human subjects are shaped by and through their encounters with non-human subjects, but there seems to be less interest among literary scholars in texts that are explicitly about the human-directed shaping of animal agents. These dynamics are understandable, bearing in mind the political project of animal studies: the revolutionary desire to see animals as literary agents and to rethink the anthropocentrism of both fiction and theory.[1] However, for many writers and readers alike companion-making technologies are important in and of themselves, as pathways for rethinking the complicated ethical deliberations that shape our

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1 See, for example: Susan McHugh, "Literary Animal Agents," *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 487–95.

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relationships with non-human significant others and for understanding animal agency.

Literary and cultural scholars who have tried to conceptualize the attribution of agency to canines – including Susan McHugh, Nicole Shukin, Harlan Weaver, Bénédicte Boisseron – agree that there exist contexts in which dogs are seen as capable of exhibiting some degree of agency and that their agency is usually linked to the humans who define themselves as the dogs' masters or caretakers and to the dominant ideological discourses that these humans espouse.[2] As historian Chris Pearson writes, "animal agency is often entangled with human agency in reciprocal and hybrid ways."[3] The above-mentioned scholars are particularly interested in exploring how the perception of canines as agents shifts with relation to the status of the humans these canines are associated with and how easy it is for dogs, or certain types of dogs, to become associated with purely human constructs, such as patriotism or racism, to the point where animals become emblems of human ideological projects – an example explored by Boisseron is the use of police dogs, mostly German shepherds, against civil rights activists in the 1960s in the US south.[4] The same actions performed by dogs in different contexts can be seen as elements of different ideological projects: a bloodhound on the trail of an escaped slave performs the same species-specific behavior (trailing) as a bloodhound on the trail of a missing child, and yet the perception of these dogs as agents is – at least from a contemporary perspective – strikingly different.

One tension that needs to be explored further is whether literary canines' capability to become agents and enforcers of humans' ideological projects is presented as an inborn and essential capability of the species or a learned skill that is acquired through various disciplinary protocols. There seems to be a paradoxical dialectic in many representations of canines as agents, one in which it is natural for canines to want to act on behalf of their humans – popular stories of heroic canines that sacrifice their lives for their humans locate this naturalness as the essence of dogness – but at the same time such feats, especially when carried out in formal contexts, serve as evidence of an agency that has been

2 Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Nicole Shukin, "Security Bonds: On Feeling Power and the Fiction of an Animal Governmentality," *English Studies in Canada* 39.1 (2013): 177–98; "The Biopolitics of Animal Love: Two Settler Stories," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*, eds. Susan McHugh, Robert McKay, and John Miller (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 541–55; Harlan Weaver, *Bad Dog: Pit Bull Politics and Multispecies Justice* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).

3 Chris Pearson, "History and Animal Agencies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 241.

4 Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, 7–8; 65–78.

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shaped through precise and professional training protocols. In this article, I would like to suggest that the tension in the attribution of nature or nurture as the source of agency of literary canines can be linked to the broader ideological discourses shaping the beliefs of human authors. At the same time, instances of such tension can also reveal the paradoxical inconsistencies in these belief systems, as will be evident in the case study I propose.

Technologies of Companion-Making

In the American context, the focus on this dialectic – one which may be called in shorthand the dialectic of nature/nurture in companion-making – links thematically highly divergent narrative forms: from formulaic children's stories in the "boy-and-his-dog" convention to works by Faulkner, Steinbeck and contemporary writers like David Wroblewski, Amy Hempel, Joy Williams or Jesmyn Ward. In fact, this focus also links classics with popular fiction in ways that may seem initially uncomfortable for both writers and critics, which may hint at why so few critics have taken up this interpretive approach. Yet, the contemporary writers listed above are quite consciously reworking tropes of companion-making established in the realm of the popular. This dialectic has not been explored even in well-known classics, largely because human-animal interactions have routinely been metaphorized, leading animal studies scholar Mario Ortiz Robles to begin his explorations of animals in literature with the question "What is it like to be a trope?".[5] Ortiz Robles, along with other contemporary animal studies scholars, advocates for taking the non-human characters seriously as animals and not only as foils for reflection on human relationships and values. Faulkner's *The Bear* can be read as being about the making of Ike McCaslin – and this is how it has been traditionally read – but also about the making of Lion, even though the dog's process of becoming is omitted from most critical readings. John Steinbeck openly claimed that his early short story collection *The Red Pony* was simply about "the training of horses,"[6] an angle that was not taken up by the many critics who have discussed this story as Jody's coming-of-age tale.[7]

Reading highbrow contemporary or modernist writers through the lens I suggest is certainly worthwhile, yet in this article, I would like to analyze the dialectic of nature/nurture in the shaping of canine agents in two relatively unknown works of juvenile fiction by Leon F. Whitney: *That Useless Hound*

5 Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

6 John Steinbeck, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 71.

7 An exception is John Seelye's introduction to the Penguin edition of Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*, which connects the short story cycle to the boy-and-dog genres.

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(1950) and *That's My Dog!* (1952).[8] While this may seem an odd choice, it is a strategic one, as the author's public persona and other published writings encourage the slippage from animal to human; the reading of animals as standing in for ideas about humans. Yet, as will become clear, if we do not actively resist such slippage, we may find ourselves in a position that is very uncomfortable ethically. If we do resist it, it becomes possible to read Whitney as an observant and experienced, though certainly not innocent, chronicler of canine worlds. Whitney's books set against his public persona bring out yet another aspect of the nature/nurture dialectic in the shaping of canine agents – politics.

Naturalist and modernist writers' tendency to overemphasize the role of heredity and to lean towards a eugenic vision of society has been extensively explored by literary critics but only in relation to human characters and anthropocentric visions of the world.[9] Meanwhile, contemporary animal studies scholars have explored the politics of the nature/nurture debate but not in relation to literary fiction. An excellent and highly relevant example of this second type of inquiry is Harlan Weaver's recent analysis of pit-bull politics in the contemporary United States. Weaver juxtaposes the two dominant discourses on pit bulls and ties them to specific political positions. The first discourse – which could be called eugenic, though Weaver does not use that word – sees heredity as the dominant force shaping the dogs' behavior. The animals are "natural-born killers" whose inborn behavioral traits cannot be changed through environmental influence. Elimination of undesirables is thus the only option for keeping society safe. This is the discourse of humane euthanasia and BSL, or breed-specific legislation – laws designed to discourage humans from keeping certain kinds of dogs. This discourse, as is often the case with discourses that naturalize differences via recourse to biology, has a clear racist dimension. The dogs' supposed inborn aggression is transposed onto the racial group associated with them, that is African Americans. The second discourse – the social constructionist one – claims that it is possible to successfully rehabilitate all dogs, even former fighting dogs, through the use of training techniques rooted in behavioral science. This discourse dominates in what Weaver refers to as "cultures of rescue."[10] In *Bad Dog*, Weaver critically deconstructs both of these dis-

8 Leon F. Whitney, *That Useless Hound* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1950); Leon F. Whitney, *That's My Dog!* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1952).

9 See: Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ewa Barbara Luczak, *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

10 Weaver, *Bad Dog*, 67.

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courses as engaged in political projects of their own and as, simply put, insufficient, thus revealing the pit bull to be a product of Harawayan "nature-cultures," or of the necessary elision of the distinction between these two binary oppositions.

Leon Fradley Whitney's Fraught Reputation

Once the tension between nature and culture in the shaping of canine agents is identified as a literary theme and as a significant moral dilemma, it can be recognized across various literary forms. My decision to trace the playing out of this theme using Leon Fradley Whitney's fiction has to do with the surprising political dimension that such analysis reveals in relation to Whitney's public persona. Whitney is most often remembered as the executive secretary of the American Eugenics Society and the author of two pseudoscientific books of non-fiction that propagated the ideas of eugenics: *The Builders of America* (1927, co-authored with Ellsworth Huntington) and *The Case for Sterilization* (1934). As Stefan Kuhl writes, Whitney was one of the "mainline eugenicists" who, "in principle agreed with the ethnic as well as the eugenic racism implemented in Nazi Germany."[11] He even corresponded with Hitler who, in 1934, personally thanked Whitney for sending him a copy of his book.[12] In his unpublished autobiography, undated but written towards the end of his life, Whitney recalls the exchange in an anecdotal manner, without any traces of shame.[13] No public apology about the errors of his eugenic views ever came from Whitney, and after eugenics fell out of favor, he devoted himself to writing solely about the training, care, and breeding of dogs, cats, and pigeons. Even though Whitney was a dog enthusiast throughout his life, he only decided to pursue a degree in veterinary medicine in his forties, after he lost his job with the American Eugenics Society. Until his retirement, he maintained a private veterinary practice in Orange, Connecticut, and remained well-respected among animal breeders and trainers.

On the basis of this brief biography, one would expect Whitney's fiction, as well as his work on dogs more generally, to provide a thinly veiled exposition of eugenic views, especially bearing in mind that after World War II the breeding of dogs was – and continues to be – seen as one of the last vestiges of eugenic

11 Stefan Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism and German National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.

12 Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection*, 85.

13 Leon Whitney, *Autobiography*, unpublished, 204–205. Whitney's autobiography is available at the archives of the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia in the Whitney Papers collection. A 50-page excerpt has also been digitalized and is available at: https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text:287761.

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thought. This is a widely accepted thesis and one that appears both in academic accounts of intellectual history and in popular culture, from Dominick LaCapra's theoretical reflection on the limits of history to BBC's documentary *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* (2008). As LaCapra argues: "Forms of prejudice that have been recognized and condemned with respect to humans may find a refuge in conceptions and treatment of other animals. For example, the notion of the purity of breed with regards to dogs has racist overtones, including the quasi-ritual horror at mixing breeds, the prejudice against 'mutts.'"[14] Thus, Whitney's descent into dog breeding after eugenics became associated with the atrocities of Nazi Germany would seem to make sense: with his ideas no longer accepted among mainstream scientists, Whitney retreats into the world of animal breeding. It would, except that Whitney's dog books for children are not overtly eugenic. In fact, they explicitly oppose two major concepts within eugenic thought: the value of so-called blood purity coupled with a proscription against miscegenation and the dominance of nature over nurture; that is, the valuation of that which is inherited over that which can be acquired through environmental influence. A binary opposition between nature and nurture, key for establishing the agenda of eugenics, was introduced in the sub-title of Francis Galton's 1874 book *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture*, and Galton clearly took the side of nature.[15] Even though in the 1920s the turn to soft eugenics involved some acknowledgment of nurture, eugenic efforts to "breed better people" remained a grotesque overestimation of the heritability of behavioral and intellectual traits in humans.[16]

If we understand eugenics along these lines, then Whitney's books do not fit the eugenic mold: the canine heroes of both books are not purebred pedigree animals, and both manage to achieve great success, not because of their heritage but in spite of it. What makes their success stories possible are the innovative training methods employed by the dogs' young owners. In a rough juxtaposition of discourses of training versus breeding, it is training that focuses on the shaping of canine agency through environmental influence and Whitney is clearly siding with training over good breeding. I am not suggesting that Whitney's juvenile fiction merits his rehabilitation or that it constitutes an apology for his eugenic views – that would certainly be an overstatement. On the contrary, these apparent contradictions between the two books and Whitney's public image suggest

14 Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 155.

15 Francis Galton, *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London: Macmillan, 1874).

16 For a hugely influential history of the eugenics movement in the United States, see: Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

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possible re-conceptualizations of eugenics as a much broader discourse that retains room for softer techniques of shaping society. Maurizio Meloni has argued that "the varieties of eugenics in the first decades of the twentieth century were united less by direct politicization of a particular theory of heredity than by a common ethos."[17] and it would seem that Whitney's books are proof of his thesis. That said, I am not interested in reading these books simply as metaphors for human societies but as books about people and dogs. Despite their aesthetic naivete, they have potential for suggesting new paths for conceptualizing the tension between nature and nurture in discourses that focus on the factors that contribute to the shaping of canine agency.

Rehabilitating the Bloodhound

Whitney's dog books never became classics of the genre and never went beyond their first printings: respectively in 1950 (*That Useless Hound*) and 1952 (*That's My Dog!)*. The books came out with Dodd & Mead, which, at the time was a respectable publisher with good distribution. A likely hypothesis for why Whitney's books never reached the status of juvenile classics is their author's over-pronounced interest in the intricacies of dog training. Books like Jim Kjelgaard's popular *Big Red* (1945), superficially also about dog training, never went deeply into the particulars of training regimens and the step-by-step minutia of resolving specific training challenges. The reader learns that Big Red was not the kind of dog who could be beaten into submission – "But you can't give Red a lickin'! […] He's too smart and sensitive" – as opposed to Danny's father's hounds which always need "a hidin'"[18] and Danny's love almost miraculously brings out the dog's inborn hunting talent and cures him of bad habits. A similarly phantasmatic account of behavior change in response to love can be detected in Jack London's *White Fang* (1906), when the wolfdog's behavior shifts completely, once he recognizes Weedon Scott's affection.[19] Conversely, both of Whitney's books read, at times, like training manuals. This does make tedious reading for anyone who is not interested in the practicalities of dog training, but it is highly useful for understanding Whitney's views on the shaping of canine agency.

Whitney's first dog novel, *That Useless Hound*, is involved in the bigger project of redefining public perception of the bloodhound by showing the dog to be

17 Maurizio Meloni, *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66.
18 Jim Kjelgaard, *Big Red* (New York: Holiday House, 2011), 113–14.
19 Shukin, "Security Bonds," 177–98.

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amenable to environmental influence and modern training techniques. In some ways, this project is similar to the one undertaken by contemporary pit bull rescue groups described by Harlan Weaver in *Bad Dog:* an effort is made to disentangle a particular breed from a history of practices that naturalized a biological essence as the cause of violent behavior, and in both cases, the connections are those between dogs and African Americans.[20] After all, bloodhounds were remembered as dogs that were used to hunt down escaped slaves in the Americas.[21] The dogs were seen as blood-thirsty beasts, incapable of controlling their aggression and acting out of pure impulsive rage, traits that marked them as savage and uncivilized and that were also transposed onto their prey via racist discourses. On the other hand, the dogs were also trained in ways that increased their hatred of Blacks – an assumption that in itself was rooted in an essentializing and racist vision in which Blacks are othered also via smell.[22] Whitney, a bloodhound owner and breeder himself, was highly aware of the breed's unfortunate pre-Civil War history. In a different book, a non-fiction training manual for bloodhound trainers first published in 1937, he writes:

> At this time, too, the owners of so-called bloodhounds appreciated the name and used it to the fullest extent trying to establish a reputation for ferocity in order to strike terror into the negro population and persons with criminal proclivities. The book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, never did the bloodhound's reputation any good and the frequent shows that were given all over the country, rather turned the public against such 'blood-thirsty animals.'[23]

Whitney was very much invested in the bloodhound campaign, and he clearly sided with the breed's capability for being nurtured: that is, for being amenable to training techniques that could counter the dogs' potential for aggression. Efforts to rehabilitate the bloodhound first began in turn-of-the-century Britain, when authorities first used scenting dogs in the famous Jack the Ripper case. In the article "Bloodhounds as Detectives," Neil Pemberton explores the "public un-

20 It should also be added that the biological link between the dogs of slave-catchers and twentieth-century bloodhounds is debatable. As the dog fancy became established in the second half of the nineteenth-century, stud books were based on so-called foundation stock. The bloodhound as an official breed was based on British dogs, imported to the US at the turn of the century and later. While there is, of course, a biological connection between all dogs, there was little influence of the dogs used in the US and the Caribbean as slave-catching dogs on what emerged as the modern bloodhound breed.

21 A detailed and up-to-date history of the use of dogs against slaves in the Americas can be found in: Tyler D. Perry and Charlton W. Yingling, "Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas," *Past & Present* 246 (Feb. 2020): 69–108.

22 Perry and Yingling, "Slave Hounds," 75–76; Neil Pemberton, "Bloodhounds as Detectives: Dogs, Slum Stench and Late-Victorian Murder Investigation," *Cultural and Social History* 10.1 (2013): 83–84.

23 Leon Fradley Whitney, *Bloodhounds and How to Train Them* (No publisher given, 1937), 37.

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ease" evoked by the presence of bloodhounds on the city streets and authorities' attempts to appease such fears by emphasizing the dog's status as tools of forensic analysis.[24] Whitney's 1950 book, along with his previous manuals and magazine articles, constitutes an attempt to transfer the campaign to the other side of the Atlantic, and the tools he employs are the same as the ones used in Britain: the dogs are presented as highly trainable and capable of the utmost precision in identifying different smells; they work quietly and methodically; the training techniques are effective and science-based, and public safety is additionally secured through an emphasis on control of the dogs via leashes and harnesses – the dogs are not madly running loose.

The setting of Whitney's novel is a prison camp somewhere in the "Deep South," where the main protagonist's father, Mr. Ward, is a warden, and the entire family lives inside the prison camp. The warden keeps unpedigreed bloodhounds – also referred to as "just mutts" – for the purpose of tracking convicts who dare to escape. At the story's outset, Dave, the warden's son, has just returned home from the hospital after suffering a bout of polio, which left him unable to walk without assistance.[25] He is gifted an orphaned bloodhound pup, whom he decides to train to track with the help of his friends – two African-American convicts, named Abe and Shorty and referred to as "trusties."[26] Dave, who is in possession of a modern book on bloodhound training – conveniently, Whitney had authored such a book in 1937 – wants to train his pup differently than his father trains his dogs – he is disgusted with the fact that dogs are put to savage uses and with the "bestial and antiquated system of corporal punish-

24 Pemberton, "Bloodhounds as Detectives," 72.

25 An additional side note about the motif of illness in the novel can be added here: the boy is shown as recovering from paralysis through engaging in the physical activity of training the dog. The prescription of physical activity for patients suffering from the aftereffects of polio was a common one and has been deconstructed by scholars from the medical humanities as highly ableist at its core. Being able to walk, even in highly uncomfortable leg braces, was a sign of one's recovery. Walking was held as a normative ideal. In Whitney's novel, Dave walks first with the use of his two friends, Abe and Shorty, whose bodies serve as structures or frames for his frail body. Dave's weak leg is then tied to Shorty's leg, forming a three-legged interracial being. Finally, Dave becomes able to walk on his own. For more on walking as the normative ideal for polio patients see: Daniel J. Wilson, "And They Shall Walk Again: Ideal Versus Reality in Polio Rehabilitation in the United States," *Asclepio. Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia* 61.1 (2009): 175–92.

26 The theme of interracial friendship, while progressive in its very presence, is played out very schematically. Abe and Shorty are painted as gentle giants and are not particularly smart. Their role among the population of convicts – they take care of the dogs used to pursue escaped convicts – and their undying allegiance to the warden's son, means that they are drawn using the set of stereotypes well-known from, among other books, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Abe is also extremely strong physically and his prison conviction is the result of him killing another man "without meanin' to."

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ment."[27] He wants to teach the dog – who receives the name Useless after Dave's father concedes that the pup is "slow, pokey, and just about useless for man hunting"[28] – to trail not just any human scent but to be able to recognize and distinguish between different scents. Ultimately, Dave wants to use his dog not for trailing escaped convicts but for tracking down lost persons, a job that he sees as more civilized and sophisticated.

According to Dave's method, the dogs' slowness and precision are achieved through the use of two training tools that the warden finds unacceptable: the leash and the harness. Mr. Ward's insistence on relying on dogs' "nature" when learning to track makes him wary of such innovations, and thus the harness remains Dave's secret weapon, providing him with greater control of the dog on the track. Most importantly, in Dave's undertaking, there is no need for the dogs to bark on the trail or to be aggressive towards the human they have found. In his training manual, Whitney was adamant that the bloodhound is "the gentlest creature of dogdom"[29] and in the novel, he provides specific tools for securing this state: early socialization and reward-based training. Useless learns to like and accept all kinds of people from puppyhood, and his tracking training utilizes food rewards. The dog is taught that a tasty treat is waiting for him at the end of the track – in effect, he is excited and happy to meet the person he has been trailing. Dave's father scorns his son's training methods: "'Dogs trailing for a reward!' The idea of such a thing seemed to pain him. 'Hounds trail by nature,' he said. 'My hounds get rewarded with a chance to nip at the game once in a while.'"[30] In the end, ironically named Useless proves his usefulness by finding several lost people: a little girl who wandered off the trail, an elderly lady suffering from memory loss, and – in a dramatic plot twist – his owner Dave, who is kidnapped by an escaped convict. Reconciliation between father and son is inevitable; the oedipal conflict is resolved, and even the two "trusties" are granted their freedom after a show of bravery during a particularly dangerous trailing escapade with Useless. The boy's methods – based on the most up-to-date scientific knowledge – have proved superior to his father's more traditional approach.

The conflict between the old and the new, crudeness and precision, science and tradition can also be perceived as a conflict between nature and nurture, and one in which nurture sides with progress and scientific advancement. However, even though Whitney's book extols the possibilities opened up by sophisticated techniques of behavior shaping, he never renounces nature – he questions the shallow understanding of the concept, the one associated with Dave's father. For

27 Whitney, *That Useless Hound*, 151.
28 Ibid., 36.
29 Whitney, *Bloodhounds and How to Train Them*, 3.
30 Whitney, *That Useless Hound*, 97.

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Mr. Ward's pronouncement – "Hounds trail by nature" – is saturated with narrative irony in the context of what is essentially a training manual. Whitney's goal of rehabilitating the bloodhound is rooted in revealing that both types of human-canine interactions, those advocated by Dave and by his father, constitute training but are based in strengthening different "natural" instincts – prey drive in the case of the father's methods and canine sociability in the case of his son's. Ethologists Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, in their influential book on canine behavior and evolution, write that behavior is "a synergism between the genetic nature of the animal and the environment in which it finds itself. This synergism is nature *times* nurture, and not, as was argued until the 1950s, nature *plus* nurture."[31] The Coppingers' mathematical metaphor emphasizes the inseparability of genetics and environmental influence, and Whitney's book shows a rather complex and progressive understanding of behavioral genetics. In the story of Useless, a dog that grows up to be very different from his parents, it is trainability, understood as susceptibility to environmental influence, that is revealed to be the legacy of long-term human-canine coexistence.

The Lion and the Lamb

Whitney's second dog book, while also emphasizing the possibilities of environmental influence, makes a slightly different statement, as it is not engaged in a campaign for rehabilitating an entire breed but in emphasizing the possibilities of an individual dog – one initially considered an undesirable runt. It does this while attacking the notions of "blood purity" that were important for human eugenicists and constituted an unquestioned dogma for members of the purebred dog fancy.

The human hero of *That's My Dog!* is a teenage boy named Frank and nicknamed Squirrel for his incredible agility. Frank's uncle, Dr. Robinson, is a Yale professor engaged in research about raccoon behavior.[32] For this purpose he needs a steady supply of test subjects, provided through bloodless raccoon hunts. He breeds a pair of his own coonhounds – though he is slightly worried about their dubious parentage as he got them from an unreputable dog broker – and the litter of pups born at the story's outset includes a strange-looking runt, a long-haired pup with very long ears. The origin of the pup's, Spike's, long hair is never explained in detail, though of course readers fluent in dog breeding will know

31 Lorna and Raymond Coppinger, *Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 29–30.

32 The novel is set in an area that Whitney was intimately familiar with. He was a long-term resident of Orange, Connecticut and had taught at Yale, though he was never a tenured or full-time faculty member.

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that the unusual coat can result from one of the three following scenarios: the litter could have multiple sires, with the long-haired pup being fathered by a non-coonhound; the parents could be mixed-breed dogs that looked like coonhounds, or the pup could be a purebred coonhound and the long coat is the result of recessive genes that can skip many generations. It is, in fact, typical for short-haired breeds that carry the recessive gene for long coats to have long-haired pups once in a while; e. g., long-haired German shepherds constitute about ten percent of the breed's population. In the second edition of *How To Breed Dogs*, another one of Whitney's manuals for breeders, the author mentions that one of his two best dogs ever was named Spike and was "a Redbone x American Farm Shepherd. He was larger than either parent and had so powerful a voice he could be heard three miles away on a clear windless night."[33] A mix of a coonhound and a farm dog would most likely look exactly like the fictional Spike, suggesting that the narrative had some biographical basis. Dr. Robinson wants to "dispose of the long-haired one,"[34] an obvious euphemism for killing the puppy, because he sees him as a "no-account mongrel that shouldn't be allowed to grow up."[35] Frank, on the other hand, becomes attached to the puppy and begs his uncle to allow him to keep it. Dr. Robinson reluctantly agrees and enters into a wager with the boy: Frank can keep the pup only if he is able to train him to be a "first-class coon hound."[36] He also does not want other hunters to know that "an atrocity" such as this pup was born in his kennel and asks the boy to keep the dog's coat clipped. As a result, the dog can "pass" for a coonhound, though not a very shapely one.

In Whitney's book, the "atrocious mongrel" in the end proves himself to be a champion raccoon-hunting dog, despite his dubious parentage. However, the book focuses not on the ultimate success but on the innovative training process that led to it. The dominant technique of coonhound training at the time resembled the methods used for the training of man-tracking bloodhounds, as described in *That Useless Hound*. It was based on strengthening the dogs' inborn prey drive by allowing them, from time to time, to brutally kill the treed raccoon, as a reward for a job well done. Frank, however, applies a completely different strategy with Spike: the boy raises an orphaned raccoon and makes sure that the dog and the raccoon, named Rube, become best friends. The boy, inspired by stories of unusual interspecies friendships that he reads about in magazines, asks his mother: "Do you remember those pictures of strange companions in that magazine? There was a raccoon and a fawn, and a cat nursing a rat, and lots of

33 Leon F. Whitney, *How to Breed Dogs*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Howell Book House, 1971), 349. The first edition was published in 1937.
34 Whitney, *That's My Dog!*, 21.
35 Ibid., 22.
36 Ibid., 23.

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queer combinations, but not dog and coon together."[37] This conversation evolves into a longer one about which attitudes and behaviors are inborn and which are acquired, with mom even suggesting that her daughter Pauline's fear of snakes may be the result of the child imitating her mother's dislike of the creatures and not an inborn and universal human fear. As for Spike and Rube, their relationship takes on an almost biblical dimension. Frank says: "'The lion shall lie down with the lamb.' I heard that in Sunday School. 'The coonhound shall lie down with the raccoon.' Better still?"[38] The two animals indeed "lie down together" and become best friends, carelessly playing for hours on end.

The unlikely friendship between the dog and the raccoon becomes the framework of Frank's training method: he teaches Spike to tree raccoons by hiding Rube in a tree and allowing Spike to find him. Each successful attempt at treeing the raccoon ends with a play session for the two friends. This unusual method becomes the source of a happy reunion between the boy and his dog after Spike is stolen by petty thieves who, upon recognizing the dog's amazing skills, want to enter him in a trial and win the prize money. Even after they are caught, they insist that Spike is a dog they legally purchased, and the fact that the dog's appearance has changed – he is now long-coated and scruffy-looking because his coat has not been clipped – gives credence to the thieves' story. The dog's reaction to Rube is used as a test in a climactic courtroom scene, where the jury's decision is made clear by the dog's and the raccoon's joyful reconciliation. Spike goes on to save Frank from an attack by a bear – a typical plot element in classic boy-and-dog tales – and the book ends with Dr. Robinson recognizing that he has lost his bet with Frank.

The similarities between the two books are strong: in both cases, the animals are literal underdogs: they are made outcasts through their dubious parentage (Spike), physical appearance (Spike) and apparently undesirable behavior (Useless). The novels reveal the non-neutral positionality of the perspective of utility: the bloodhound pup's lack of speed and general friendliness, indeed useless for chasing escaped convicts, become a source of his utility in the enterprise of tracking missing persons. Both novels also condemn putting dogs to use for violent ends: the chasing of escaped criminals is juxtaposed with finding lost children and the brutal killing of raccoons with their trapping for scientific research purposes. *That Useless Hound* reveals a rudimentary recognition of the ethical problems generated through the continued use of canines against African Americans and – while naively perpetuating certain racist stereotypes – the book advocates for ending this association. Both promote new training methods, which are not based on strengthening the dogs' prey instincts but which rely on

37 Ibid., 33–34.
38 Ibid., 34.

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dogs' sociability. Canines trail and locate specific targets not to attack them but because a history of positive reinforcement in the form of food rewards or play is associated with the activity. Whitney sketches a vision of the world in which not only do dogs love and are loved by their humans, but they also engage with the world through love. Nurture – understood here as a carefully designed training process based on positive reinforcement – is shown as having the potential for superseding or strengthening the dog's inborn prey drive, or the potential for violence. The question we are frazzled with at this point is: How was it possible for a man who corresponded with Hitler and never renounced his eugenic views to author books like these two?

Boys, Dogs, Eugenics

One may suppose that because both of Whitney's dog books were written using the popular boy-and-his-dog convention, the author's departure from eugenic ideas may have been precipitated by his reliance on this child-friendly formula. After all, what could be more anti-eugenic than heartwarming stories about the adventures of children and their pets? Yet, upon closer analysis, this particular sub-genre of the children's animal story is anything but innocent. It is embedded in the most significant ideological debates of the first half of the twentieth century, advocating for a highly anthropocentric and utilitarian vision of what constitutes a desirable human-animal relationship, but also promoting specific versions of masculinity and racial identity. Eric Tribunella has convincingly written about how stories in which adolescent boys are expected to kill animals, often their beloved pet animals (e. g. , in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* or in Fred Gipson's *Old Yeller*), as a stepping-stone towards maturity, promote a version of masculinity which is both marked by the experience of trauma and an assumption that the suppression of emotional attachments to others is the mark of a real man.[39]

It should be clarified that unlike the two books mentioned above – and more in the tradition of Eric Knight's *Lassie-Come-Home* and Albert Terhune's *Lad: A Dog* – Whitney's books have happy endings: the dogs do not die, and they manage to overcome various obstacles to be reunited with their young owners. These books, however, are no less implicated in the ideologies of the day. In addition to their rather blatant overplaying of canine desire to be with humans, a strategy of anthropocentrism insightfully examined by Erica Fudge in *Pets*, they are also overt in their seal of approval for strategies that tie a dog's worth to their purebred

39 Eric Tribunella, *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010).

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status; that is, for strategies mirroring eugenic reasoning.[40] Terhune's Lad was "an eighty-pound collie, thoroughbred in spirit as well as in blood. He had the benign dignity that was a heritage of endless generations of high-strain ancestors."[41] Lassie's incredible journey is also grounded in the heritage that elevates her from among other village dogs. Unlike them, she is well-bred: "But Lassie had something that the others had not. She had blood. She was a pure-bred dog, and behind her were long generations of the proudest and best of her kind."[42] The dogs are marked as noble and intelligent specifically because of the human-controlled process of selection that has shaped them over the years.

Animal characters have long been used as allegorical representations of human virtues and vices, especially – though not exclusively – in children's literature.[43] While the animals in the boy-and-his-dog convention are not stand-ins for humans as animal characters would be in fables – these are realistic narratives – the implicitly didactic character of juvenile fiction encourages readers to treat the human-canine relationships as templates for relations between humans, in the long Lockean tradition of using pets as educational tools that help children model desirable behaviors. After all, these are stories about love, loyalty, and sacrifice. Even though the stories were about dogs, they were most certainly read as promoting values that should govern human society. If we strategically accept that these texts are not just about canines but can be interpreted as proposing a logic that can also be used to think about humans, the boy-and-his-dog books published in the first half of the twentieth century were largely not anti-eugenic. On the contrary, they directly promoted "good breeding" as a virtue. The two examples mentioned above are no exceptions; there are many more books that follow the narrative pattern in which a special animal stands out against the background of other dogs because of a combination of appearance, intelligence, and virtuousness depicted – a canine version of the Greek concept of *kalokagathia*, which is sometimes identified as a precursor of

40 Erica Fudge, *Pets* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). Fudge argues that stories about canine homecomings, such as Lassie's arduous and highly unlikely journey, reflect the desire of pet owners for stories that confirm their belief that their pets love them and want to be with them, a corollary of the fear that pets would much rather be free and escape from their human owners.

41 Albert Payson Terhune, *Lad: A Dog* (Thorndike, ME: G.K Hall & Company, 1997), 7. The book was originally published in 1919. It was followed by numerous sequels describing the adventures of Lad's progeny.

42 Eric Knight, *Lassie-Come-Home* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1968), 131. *Lassie-Come-Home* was serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1938 and was first published as a standalone book in 1940.

43 Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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modern eugenics.[44] Jim Kjelgaard's highly popular *Big Red* (1945), in which a poor and simple country boy loves and trains a champion Irish Setter, is yet another case in point: Red is an exemplary representative of a breed deemed "sensitive, intelligent, and proud"[45] while Danny's association with the dog is his ticket to social advancement.[46] In James H. Street's *Good-Bye, My Lady* (1954), a popular novel based on a 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* short story, an almost illiterate young orphan finds a strange dog in the swamps surrounding his cabin and trains the dog – whom he names Lady, because of her dignified presence – to hunt. In the end, the dog proves to be a specimen of a very rare breed: a basenji, turning the plot into a canine version of the story of the foundling who turns out to be a prince.

One would be hard-pressed to find a boy-and-his-dog book from the 1920s, 1930s, or 1940s in which the dog is not a beautiful and carefully bred animal.[47] Of course, this is not to say that eugenic ideas were not widely ridiculed via animal stories even at the height of the popularity of eugenics. For example, Charlie Chaplin's movie *A Dog's Life* (1918) has been read as mocking eugenics, but the film is – of course – neither a novel nor a juvenile text.[48] In boys' books, it is Fred Gipson's *Old Yeller* (1956) that begins a paradigm change embraced by second-wave revisionist boy-and-his-dog books that not only feature mixed breed canine characters but also expand the repertoire of human heroes to non-white (*Sounder*, 1969) and non-male characters (*Because of Winn Dixie*, 2000). However, these texts appeared after Whitney's two dog books were published. It is hard to believe, but in juvenile fiction, Whitney was, in fact, a pioneer of underdog characters: runts of the litter who go on to achieve greatness, canine heroes who succeed despite their humble heritage and ungainly looks.

44 Simona Forti, "The Biopolitics of Souls: Racism, Nazism and Plato," *Political Theory* 34.1 (2006): 9–32.

45 Kjelgaard, *Big Red*, 265.

46 The argument proposed by numerous historians of pet-keeping is that the rise of the purebred dog fancy in the mid-nineteenth century is linked to desires of social advancement, which could be realized through the ownership of a purebred dog. The key texts on pet-keeping in the nineteenth century include: Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in Victorian England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Margaret E. Derry, *Bred for Perfection: Shorthorn Cattle, Collies and Arabian Horses since 1800* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Michael Worboys, Julie-Marie Strange and Neil Pemberton, *The Invention of the Modern Dog: Breed and Blood in Victorian Britain* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

47 Mixed-breed dogs were often heroes in turn-of-the-century animal autobiographies, modelled after Sewell's *Black Beauty*, e.g., Marshall Saunders's *Beautiful Joe* (1893). The dog's designation as a "mongrel" adds to its status as a victim of human contempt and violence. In these texts, written with the explicit goal of ending the mistreatment of animals, the mixed-breed dog evokes the reader's compassion.

48 Ewa Barbara Luczak, *Mocking Eugenics: American Culture Against Scientific Hatred* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 20–45.

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Canine Eugenics

Flustered with the incongruence of Whitney's eugenics and his fictional underdog canines, one may suppose that perhaps Whitney was capable of drawing a hard line between the worlds of humans and animals, between domestic animal breeding and eugenics. However, he saw no difficulties in extrapolating his work on one species onto another, and such ease of cross-species extrapolation was characteristic of many proponents of eugenics whose experimental experience, if it existed at all, came from animal breeding. Whitney explicitly wrote of his work in eugenics as informing his ideas about breeding dogs. In fact, as he laid out his principles of dog breeding in 1959, he referred to them – in good faith – as "canine eugenics."[49]

By the 1950s Whitney was, however, highly dissatisfied with the activities of the American Kennel Club, the major organization regulating the breeding of purebred dogs in the United States. He complained about the AKC's use of conformation shows as benchmarks for evaluating an animal's usefulness for breeding and the concurrent loss of dogs' working ability, the potential for cooperating with humans, and general intelligence: "Today we will not permit dogs to become increasingly intelligent. We want conformists. Comes one much brighter than the rest and we eliminate him. I am talking about general intelligence – the ability to cope with the environment."[50] Whitney sees a causal link between the general public's desire for laid-back dogs that do not require much exercise and intellectual stimulation and what he refers to as degeneration. He is also critical of breeders who continue to breed dogs that produce heritable diseases, suffer from problems with breathing due to shortened muzzles (brachycephalic breeds), and cannot whelp without surgical intervention.[51] Whitney's critique of the AKC in his 1959 book does not come from what one could call an anti-anthropocentric perspective – at no point does he suggest that the enterprise of human-directed breeding selection could be inherently wrong. He simply claims that the American Kennel Club is using the wrong criteria: rather than continuing on the path of considering dogs' utility as the primary criterion of breeding selection, different criteria drive the making of canine companions in the modern world. Ironically, many of the accusations meted out by Whitney

49 Whitney repeats Galton's definition of eugenics in his 1959 book *The Truth About Dogs*, where he openly calls for canine eugenics: "So by the same token canine eugenics is the study of all the agencies under our control which may improve or impair the inborn qualities of future generations of dogs physically or mentally." Leon F. Whitney, *The Truth About Dogs* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1959), 18.

50 Whitney, *The Truth About Dogs*, 40.

51 Ibid., 41–45.

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against purebred dog breeders resemble those used today by animal welfare advocates, who criticize practices of dog breeding as eugenic.

While it is tempting to treat this unexpected alliance between Whitney and contemporary animal welfare advocates as proof of a shift in his views, there is no evidence to prove the existence of such a shift. Rather than reading Whitney's juvenile fiction coupled with *The Truth About Dogs* as proof of the evolution of his views beyond eugenics, I believe it makes more sense to read it as indicative of how broad and general eugenic thought could be: so broad that it could encompass both *The Case for Sterilization* and Spike-the-atrocious-mutt. It is possible to conceptualize eugenics – understood broadly, as Whitney understood it after Galton, as "the study of all the agencies under social control which may improve or impair future generations"[52] – without condemning miscegenation in humans or breed-mixing in canines. In fact, from the beginning of Whitney's involvement in human eugenics in the 1920s, his ideas on both humans and animals did not include proscriptions against racial mixing. In his autobiography, Whitney discusses the influence of George Shull's theory of hybrid vigor (heterosis) on his own thinking, reflecting on the superior results of mixed-race human competitors in sporting competitions: "When a strain of grain is inbred for many generations and is then outbred with another inbred strain, the progeny often exceeds the parents in size, productivity and vigor . . . . One sees it in animals too. Why not in human beings?"[53] Whitney's meandering on the mixing of human races leads him to a rather progressive understanding of the cultural constructedness of human race and to surprising conclusions – in his autobiography, he writes: "We have peculiar laws about what constitutes a Negro, some of which are based on the long discarded theory of blood dilution, laws which should have been repealed"[54] – but not to a repudiation of eugenics altogether. He simply did not see any contradictions in his support for eugenics and his views on racial mixing in humans and animals.

The initial shock one experiences upon encountering Whitney's juvenile books can and should lead to deeper reflection on eugenics as an imprecise – due to its all-encompassing character – category of cultural analysis. It should also lead to a reassessment of eugenics as simply siding with nature in the nature/nurture debate, a position advocated by e. g. Aaron Gillette.[55] It is, of course, not

52 Leon F. Whitney, *The Case for Sterilization* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1937), 38. This definition of eugenics was originally coined by Galton in: Francis Galton, *Memories of My Life* (London: Methuen, 1908), 328.

53 Whitney, *Autobiography*, 182.

54 Ibid., 183.

55 Aaron Gillette, *Eugenics and the Nature Nurture Debate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). It should be stated that many historians of eugenics have identified a turn toward "soft eugenics" or "positive eugenics" in the 1920s and 1930s. These soft methods, while often

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meaningless that the stories were written by a self-identified eugenicist. In fact, Whitney's persona certainly matters in relation to the bigger project I am advocating here – that is, an analysis of the literary representations of multi-layered technologies of producing canine agency. The nuance of Whitney's position comes from his first-hand, extensive experience with dog breeding and training. Unlike many contemporary "dog writers" who recount the life-changing effects of a relationship with an individual dog, Whitney's books are grounded in his experiences with generations and populations, and in ideas about how individual relationships intersect with stories of "kinds," as Donna Haraway would put it.[56] Whitney is not an innocent writer, but it is precisely this lack of innocence that makes his perspective unique, though his situatedness must be constantly kept in mind when interacting with his work.

Conclusion: Beyond Nature and Nurture

Whitney's status as breeder, trainer, and eugenicist makes him particularly positioned to notice the dynamics of the technologies of companion-making and question certain glib assumptions: for example, the popular belief that training is the nurture to a dog's nature; that is purely within the realm of environmental influence and independent of heredity.[57] Whitney's apotheosis of environmental influence in the two juvenile novels can be read as a study of *nature times nurture*, a reading which reveals the inextricable entanglement of the two concepts, or rather their insufficiency as separate and competing categories. Let us re-examine the case of Spike and Rube: the coon hound and the raccoon "lying together" as friends. What is initially viewed as an example of environmental influence in action – the dog learning to control his instincts and not attack the raccoon and the raccoon learning not to fear the dog – is, in fact, an example of the putting to use of a "natural" principle, the principle of imprinting, under the "unnatural" direction of man. Imprinting was most likely known to Whitney

coupled with various measures of coercive or voluntary birth control, consisted of promoting health and hygiene and nutrition. Whitney was involved in, e. g., The Fitter Families contests, in which entire families were evaluated according to a set of criteria developed by Charles Davenport (and resembling livestock shows). Positive eugenics acknowledged the influence of the environment as impeding or enabling the full development of an individual's genetic potential. For more on positive eugenics, see: Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction and the Family in the United States, 1890–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 8–10; 131–61.

56 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 97.

57 For more on the relationship of training and breeding see: Justyna Włodarczyk, *Genealogy of Obedience: Reading North American Dog Training Literature, 1850s–2000s* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2018).

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through the work of Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of modern ethology, a controversial figure who received the Nobel Prize in physiology for his work on individual and social behavior patterns in animals, but who has also been accused of eugenic views and collaboration with the Nazis.[58] Lorenz and Tinbergen described imprinting as an instinctive bond: a young animal's attachment to the primary caretaker (usually the animal's mother). The stories of interspecies friendships mentioned by Frank in the novel most likely result from human manipulation of the animals' environment through the removal of the natural objects of imprinting – the mothers.[59] The role of the human in these stories – or at least of Lorenz in the geese experiments – is of the self-appointed manager of nature's processes, a grand designer of interspecies relations.

In the case of dogs, which differ in their development from geese, the imprinting period is usually referred to as the critical period for social development and takes place after puppies are weaned but before they reach maturity. Raymond and Lorna Coppinger describe the application of such "unnatural attachments" in the training of livestock guardian dogs, which are, as puppies, placed in sheep pens and essentially grow up as members of the flock, all the while retaining their inborn guarding instincts and protecting the sheep from predators.[60] As the Coppingers notice, the same principle was observed already by Darwin in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, where the author commented on South American shepherds' practices of placing puppies in nests of wool and allowing them to suckle from ewes.[61] While it is difficult to say with full certainty that Whitney had read *The Voyage of the Beagle* (though it is likely that he did), he is doing more in his book than adapting the scientific knowledge of the day to a form that is comprehensible for children. Through the scene's association with the Book of Isaiah's vision of the lion and the lamb, Whitney is accomplishing two goals at once: firstly, and probably consciously, he is suggesting an explanatory technology for a story normally explained through divine intervention. Secondly, and this is probably an unconscious gesture, this story of interspecies harmony is both a reminder of the potential literariness of the theme of companion-making and – as I have been suggesting throughout the paper – an

58 Boria Sax, "'What is a Jewish Dog?' Konrad Lorenz and the Cult of Wildness," *Society and Animals* 5.1 (1997): 3–21.

59 Lorenz readily extrapolated the results of his research on animal behavior onto humans and psychologists were quick to accept these extrapolations. In effect, Lorenz's work in ethology was significant for the development of theories of attachments between mother and child. See: Marga Vicedo, "The Father of Ethology and the Foster Mother of Ducks: Konrad Lorenz as Expert on Motherhood," *ISIS* 100.2 (2020): 263–92.

60 Coppinger and Coppinger, *Dogs*, 101–102.

61 Ibid., 103.

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example of how this thematic can link highly heterogenous genres: from the Bible to stories in pulp magazines.

Whitney's books are about dogs, though Whitney, of course, saw eugenics as a scientific system of bettering populations regardless of species. Yet, it is important to resist the continuous slippage from canine to human worlds and read Whitney's dog books as being about dogs. In fact, this is the only way in which they can be taken seriously as fiction informed by first-hand experience and not as allegorical representations of dangerous ideas about humans. Despite their stylistic simplicity, predictability, and the author's highly problematic biography, the concerns these books raise continue to resonate with people involved in what Donna Haraway refers to as dogland: those engaged in identity-defining practices of animal training, rescue, care, and management. Weaver's work reveals that the concerns raised by Whitney are the dynamics structuring conversations that animal activists are having among themselves – wondering to what extent an aggressive dog's behavior is the fault of their own inadequate training techniques, how much of inadequate socialization and how much is the result of "bad genes," deliberating about whether there exist irredeemable behavioral disturbances that merit the euthanasia of a dog and whether human-governed breeding selection can ever be an ethical enterprise. While I hope this article has brought to the surface several minor issues related specifically to Leon Fradley Whitney and the internal coherence of eugenic discourses, I hope it has also hinted at something bigger: the dialectic of nature/nurture in the shaping of canine agents as a major ethical concern in fiction, and by extension also in poetry, film, etc. While it may seem that animal training and breeding are not literary themes, these concerns, in major or minor ways, have also informed literature, and it is time we find ways of conceptualizing theoretical reflection on these themes.

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Jack Harrison (University of Warsaw)

Musicking with the Enemy: Mosquito Agency, Control, and Buzzing on Film*

Abstract
Difficult to ignore, mosquito sound hooks us into relations with the mosquito, and how we respond to its sounding inevitably shapes the characteristics of mosquito–human relations. This essay explores different responses to mosquito sound by analysing four sonic representations of the mosquito—two early Disney films and two recent audio-visual artworks—against a backdrop of twentieth- and twenty-first-century mosquito control research. While Disney's public-health film *The Winged Scourge* (1943) represents the mosquito with a solo buzz, the studio's earlier film *Camping Out* (1934) instead conceives of mosquito sound as musical intercommunication. Tapping into mosquito intercommunication has afforded scientists a means by which to more directly target the mosquito for destruction; however, as this essay also examines, musicking with the mosquito may lead to ambivalence over the project of improving the efficiency of the insect's eradication—a position articulated in the newer artworks.
Keywords: Nonhuman agency; mosquito sound; animals on film; mosquito control; animal music

Introduction

The humming of invisible mosquitoes sounds unnervingly close to the listener's ear in Vivian Caccuri's *Mosquito Shrine II*. Commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami in 2020, the multipartite work includes an embroidery on mosquito netting and a short film to accompany the physical artwork. The upper half of the embroidery is reminiscent of the 11th-century Bayeux tapestry, which depicts the fighting between Norman and Anglo–Saxon armies at the English Battle of Hastings. In *Mosquito Shrine II*, however, this battle is reimagined as a war between medieval knights—men wielding swords, bows and arrows, and trebuchets—and villainous mosquitoes. The landscape burns with

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bright red and orange flames while mosquitoes fly ominously across the sky as war planes or otherwise revel in the destruction with drinking, dancing and flirtation.

Mosquito Shrine II's film, on the other hand, is much like a lecture presentation, composed and presented by Caccuri who speaks in Portuguese with English subtitles. She wears a mask covering her nose and mouth (a nod to the coronavirus pandemic) and interacts playfully with green-screened maps, cartoon mosquitoes, stormy ocean landscapes, and close-ups of her embroidery. Several noisy mosquitoes buzz in the background against thumping electronic beats and spacey synthesised chords.[1]

Like the material threads of her embroidery, Caccuri's work weaves together imagery of conquest and mosquitoes from different historical sources. Both *Mosquito Shrine II's* embroidery and film directly reference dangerous mosquito characters from animated films, including footage from two early Walt Disney cartoons centred on encounters with the insect. The first Disney footage in Caccuri's film shows a raspberry-blowing boy mosquito who, in the studio's short film *Camping Out* (1934), interrupts Mickey Mouse and his friends' camping trip by buzzing along to their music session; a war between the campers and an army of mosquitoes then ensues to amusing effect as the campers invent new ways to foil the attacking swarm.[2] The second footage is taken from Disney's public-health film *The Winged Scourge* (1943); the shot is of a gargantuan mosquito's probiscis striking menacingly through the roof of an American farmer's home, which, in the original film, emphasises the threat of mosquitoes to both human health and the economy.[3] The point of *Mosquito Shrine II*, however, is to draw attention to the entanglement of colonial expansion, extractivism in the Americas, and representations of the "enemy" mosquito that attempt to justify a war against nature. Disney's cartoons, the film implies, are complicit in this imperialist project.

Despite their different reasons for depicting mosquitoes onscreen, all three films—*Camping Out*, *The Winged Scourge*, and *Mosquito Shrine II*—as well as a fourth work, *Truce*, by artists Robin Meier and Ali Momeni, feature the sounds of mosquito buzzing. Sonic renderings of mosquitoes transform across these representations; moreover, what the mosquito buzzing signals to listeners, I will argue, is unique in each case since each work newly feeds mosquito sound into an evolving conversation—a dialogue shaped simultaneously by entomologists,

1 Vivian Caccuri, *Mosquito Shrine II*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, 2020, YouTube video, 03:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbPt9lVSQ4g.

2 *Camping Out*, Walt Disney Studios, 1934, uploaded by Classic Old Cartoons, August 9, 2017, YouTube video, 07:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQC-6OtFjJI.

3 *The Winged Scourge*, Walt Disney Studios, 1943, uploaded by Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical, YouTube video, 09:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gc4a8bZxCBA.

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public-health agencies, and environmentalist and decolonial thinkers over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries—about who mosquitoes are and how they should be responded to. Firstly, using the buzz of the mosquito to evidence the insect's antagonistic nature, Disney's *Camping Out* and *The Winged Scourge* cast the mosquito as a hostile enemy; mosquito buzzing thus forms part of the apparatus used to justify wars against it—whether this justification remains within the boundaries of the fictional film world, as in *Camping Out*, or beyond it, as in *The Winged Scourge*. However, there is a significant difference between the buzzing mosquitoes in the two films, for while the later film largely represents mosquito sound as a solo mosquito's buzzing, the earlier film depicts mosquitoes sounding together and entering sonic co-ordination—both with one another and with non-mosquito characters. *Camping Out*, I argue, imagines the mosquito as a "musicking"[4] agent and its sound as intercommunication in a way that parallels contemporaneous experimental observations of mosquito sound that would come to shape later forms of mosquito control. Secondly, the thinking on mosquitoes engendered by *Camping Out* anticipates a growing sense of ambivalence around the project of mosquito eradication in the 21st century. This ambivalence, I will contend, informs and is articulated through the use of mosquito sound in audio-visual artworks such as *Truce* and *Mosquito Shrine II*.

Disney's two mosquitoes

Mosquito control is combined with sonic depictions of the mosquito in Disney's *The Winged Scourge*, commissioned by the U.S. government's Office of the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs during the Good Neighbor era.[5] Seen and heard across the Americas, *The Winged Scourge's* mosquito becomes an eradicable enemy whose extermination promises a prosperous future for humanity. The film begins by briefly introducing the mosquito, whose infectious bite is revealed to be the cause of one family's economic collapse. The film then follows this first act by demonstrating how such tragedies can be avoided: Disney's Seven Dwarf characters (originally from the studio's animated feature *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*) are depicted carrying out various methods of mosquito control, including the spraying of oil and insecticides.

4 Christopher Small, "Musicking—the Meanings of Performing and Listening. A Lecture," *Music Education Research* 1, no. 1 (March 1999): 12. Small popularises the term "musicking," which transforms the word "music" into a verb: "to music," he writes, "is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance." I borrow the term here to refer to the mosquito as both an active listener and a participant in sonic interactions featuring pitched tones.

5 Marianne Fedunkiw, "Malaria Films: Motion Pictures as a Public Health Tool," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 7 (July 2003): 1050.

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The *Anopheles* genus of mosquito is, for the majority of *The Winged Scourge*, condensed into the figure of a singular female mosquito. While several mosquitoes do eventually gang together against Dopey—one of Disney's Seven Dwarfs—in the second act by pulling apart his insect swatter, the sound these mosquitoes make is actually no different to that of the singular mosquito targeted by Dopey earlier in the film. This whining sound effect resembles a single mosquito in flight. Likewise, the orchestral underscore that traces the movements of the mosquito in the first act of the film represents the buzzing flight of the one female mosquito: it does this by unifying the orchestra's individual forces in co-ordinated, chromatically moving *tremolos* which, together, imply the hovering whine of a single insect. There are, therefore, no sounds of swarming in *The Winged Scourge*. Rather, the sonic lives of mosquitoes are represented largely through the individual female's buzzing as she searches for human blood or as she tries to avoid extermination.

The lone buzzing insect represented in *The Winged Scourge's* soundtrack achieves a particular effect: it reduces the mosquito to its significance as a human (and dwarf) enemy and thus strategically forgets that individual mosquitoes interact with other mosquitoes. In *The Winged Scourge*, there is no world belonging to the mosquito, no world that is proper to and thus shared by individuals of the *Anopheles* genus, but only a human world—one where the singular mosquito's sound exists merely as a noisy reminder to the human of her bodily proximity and impending bite. A trespasser on a human Earth, this mosquito is transformed into the malaria parasite she carries, seemingly without a place carved out for her by nature to where she might be returned.

Unlike *The Winged Scourge*, Disney's earlier animated short, *Camping Out*, is designed primarily as entertainment. The film is set on a campground in the countryside and begins with Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Horace Horsecollar enjoying a musical jamming session. The band is joined by a mosquito, who adds a buzzing countermelody to Mickey's stylings on the harmonica. However, Mickey is quickly annoyed by the mosquito's hovering and tries to shoo the mosquito away. After biting Horace on the head, the mosquito is swatted to the ground. With a crumpled probiscis, the mosquito slumps back to his home on the lake and cries out for his father between sobs: "Hey Pap! I was having fun, and a big guy hit me." The father knows immediately who is to blame: "City folks, huh!?" Without delay, the father mosquito signals to his fellow mosquitoes, who fly in a buzzing swarm formation to protect their home against the invaders.

Mickey and his friends employ various means to protect themselves from the mosquito army: the camp is transformed into a fortification; Horace squirts sticky molasses; Mickey fires peas as if manning a machine gun; and the fourth camper, Clarabelle Cow, wields an insect swatter, which, as a clear model for Dopey's future scene in *The Winged Scourge*, is eventually pulled apart by the

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attacking mosquitoes. The mosquito swarm regroups, transforming into the shape of a giant mosquito, which then chases the campers into their tent. The friends improvise using metal pans as armour and clothes pegs and hammers that trap the mosquitoes. However, finally, Mickey and Minnie devise a plan to capture the swarm in a pair of bloomers. Furious, the mosquitoes are carried out of the tent and, with a kick to the pair of undergarments, sent scurrying away.

While both films imagine human–mosquito relations as characterised by a war between humans and insects, this war differs significantly between the two films, for in contrast to *The Winged Scourge*, the mosquitoes of *Camping Out* defend their right to live peacefully in an area that they believe to have come under attack from the "city folks." United in their antagonism towards Mickey and his friends, the mosquitoes rally into a swarm. A collective buzz can be heard intermittently over the film's accompanying score throughout this battle, and, articulating their shared intent, each mosquito sounds on the same menacing pitch. The mosquitoes' co-ordinated hum not only signals their synchronized flight to meet the unwelcome campers, but also evidences their shared mosquito identity and ongoing identification with one another as defenders of a mosquito way of life and territory.

This co-ordinated buzzing in the film raises the question of mosquito intercommunication and intersubjectivity; *Camping Out* even renders mosquitoes as capable of transspecies musicking—for instance, when the young mosquito adds a countermelody to Mickey, Minnie, and Horace's performance. In contrast, the sound of *The Winged Scourge's* mosquitoes is incidental: these mosquitoes do not sing with, for, or to anyone in particular; they are represented not as communicating subjects whose intent is to express something and thereby shape their interactions with others, but as sonic objects to which no response is necessary other than a violent swat or spray of insecticide. *The Winged Scourge's* insects therefore exemplify the passive mosquitoes of "techno-politics"[6] identified by Timothy Mitchell: their buzzing is made to suffer a privation of meaning, which renders the mosquitoes themselves as uncomplicated by denying them sonically mediated relations. Moreover, what this representation of mosquitoes as simple, isolated individuals ensures is that the expertise held by the governing powers in charge of mosquito control remains firmly in place and that it continues to justify their power to rule. As Mitchell writes, expertise emerges through a strategic simplification of "the mixed way things happen, […] producing the effect of neatly separate realms of reason and the real world, ideas and their objects, the

6 Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 42. These insects are also, for Mitchell, the mosquitoes represented by social science, which, in describing the politics of disease epidemics, mirrors techno-power's reliance on nature's passivity: "The mosquito […] is said to belong to nature. It cannot speak." See Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 50.

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human and the nonhuman."[7] This is techno-politics at work. Denying the mosquito's sonic interrelations, *The Winged Scourge* functions as an apparatus of techno-power by reassuring its audience of the passiveness of nature, of its intelligibility, and, in turn, of the expert's power to overcome nature's negative forces, including the mosquito.

The sounds of mosquito control

The contrastingly responsive musical agency of mosquitoes in *Camping Out* is not without precedent. Indeed, the representation of mosquito sound in *Camping Out* seems to capture a growing interest in the mosquito as a sonic agent, which, emerging at the beginning of the 20th century and continuing today, has come to significantly shape strategies of mosquito control that attempt to rethink a reliance on insecticides. This story begins with the entomological classification of mosquito sound: hearing the mosquito with respect to genus, species, and sex, entomologists in the early 1900s attributed meaning to mosquito sound through the correspondences they identified between neatly distinct mosquito pitches and pregiven categories of mosquitoes. These early observations with regard to mosquito sound are synthesised by Leland O. Howard, Harrison G. Dyar, and Frederick Knab in their extensive four-volume review of research on the insect, published between 1912 and 1917. Further research specifically dedicated to mosquito sound and its measurement is then taken up some thirty years later by William Offenhauser and Morton Kahn, whose recordings of mosquitoes in a Cornell University laboratory with William Celestin[8] and in West Africa[9] exploited new sound technologies in the study of the insect's sonic life.

Neither of these research teams, however, are interested solely in audible taxonomies; rather, in both listening to mosquitoes and observing their behaviours, these entomologists also sought to understand mosquitoes' entanglements in webs of sonic intercommunication, including how mosquitoes respond to their sonic environments and human-made pitches and how humans might themselves be moved by and respond to mosquito musicking. One such observation of mosquitoes' musical agency appears in Howard et al.'s translation of Swiss-Brazilian naturalist Émil Goeldi's account of the *Culex quinquefasciatus* mosquito. This fascinating passage from Goeldi stresses the immorality of

7 Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 52.

8 Morton C. Kahn, William Celestin, and William Offenhauser, "Recording of Sounds Produced by Certain Disease-Carrying Mosquitoes," *Science* 101, no. 2622 (30 March 1945): 335–36.

9 William Offenhauser and Morton C. Kahn, "The Sounds of Disease-Carrying Mosquitoes," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 21, no. 3 (May 1949): 259–63.

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mosquito mating, complete with its "orgies and bacchanals" and "infernal music":

> there are two clouds, each of which is composed of individuals of only one sex, which, fluttering and describing capricious evolutions, execute, by means of the sound produced by their wings and halteres, an orchestra or recitative chorus dominated by the baton of Eros.[10]

Through poetic language, Goeldi reveals the power of the *Culex* mosquito to instil a heightened expressive register in humans—a register similar to the kind of response a concert or an artwork might inspire. Here, mosquito sound's ability to make humans feel something—for Goeldi, horror—is evidenced in a manner that blurs the human and the mosquito as creatures who can affect other bodies musically.

Yet, whereas stories of mosquitoes' musical agency are somewhat anecdotal in Howard et al., they are of prime importance in Kahn et al., for whom "[t]he most astonishing and important observation" of their experimentation "is that the noise of a single female will cause the males of the same species to burst into an answering chorus."[11] This discovery trumps their other findings concerning mosquito sound because of its potential to revolutionise technologies of mosquito control. As the opening line to their 1945 *Science* article makes clear, the primary goal of their research is to explore how mosquito sound may contribute to "[t]he destruction of disease-carrying insects," which they claim, "is a problem of the first magnitude."[12]

Like fisherfolk who bait a hook or houseowners who add cheese to the mousetrap, scientists working in the field of mosquito control looked for ways to weaponize mosquitoes' life processes so that the act of extermination might be partly performed by the mosquitoes themselves. Therefore, unlike the boy mosquito's attraction to and harmonization with the band's music in *Camping Out,* which irritates Mickey, musicking with mosquitoes in the context of mosquito control is productive interaction, promising an effective method of luring, trapping, and subsequently killing these insects. Early accounts of mosquitoes being lured by human technologies—usually by accident—can be found in Howard et al.'s first volume. A passage quoted from Sir Maxim's 1901 *London Times* article describes the author's observations of male mosquitoes swarming

10 Émil Goeldi, quoted in Leland O. Howard, Harrison G. Dyar, and Frederick Knab, *The Mosquitoes of North and Central America and the West Indies*, vol. 3 (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1915), 355.
11 Kahn et al., "Recording of Sounds," 335.
12 Kahn et al., 335.

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around a humming streetlamp on an evening in New York in 1878.[13] Other anecdotes in the book tell of music's effects—namely, the effects of specific musical pitches—on swarms of mosquitoes, as well as the observances of one electrical engineer, a Mr Weaver, who devised an apparatus to electrocute mosquitoes after noticing their attraction to the specific note of his telegraphic equipment.[14]

The promise of luring mosquitoes with sound—what Sir Maxim recognised as the mimicry of a female mosquito's mating call—prompted various mosquito control experiments during the 1930s and 40s in which mosquitoes were expected to take on some of the responsibility of their own killing. Amongst these projects was the U.S. Public Health Service's development of an electronic device in 1932 that combined a suction fan with coloured lights and musical tones to trap the mosquito.[15] As its Surgeon-General Hugh S. Cumming explained at the time, the Public Health Service was working on a machine that could better identify which frequencies mosquitoes found to be most attractive.[16] Other research, such as Offenhauser and Kahn's "mosquito calling experiments" performed during the summer of 1948,[17] replaced electronically generated luring sounds with a recording of a female mosquito played through a loudspeaker. However, a year prior to Offenhauser and Kahn's publication of their findings in 1949, entomologist Louis M. Roth expressed his concern regarding the effectiveness of sound traps as a technology designed to exterminate the mosquito.[18] Noting that it is the *males* of most mosquito species who are attracted to the tone of the females and not the other way around, Roth writes that while "it is conceivable that destroying a large percentage of males would decrease the number of impregnated females […] it appears unlikely that a killing device employing sound as an attractant would be a more efficient or economical substitute than the present methods of mosquito control."[19]

Nevertheless, there were reasons besides cost and efficiency to seek alternative mosquito-control methods: what the sonic lure of the mosquito promised was

13 Leland O. Howard, Harrison G. Dyar, and Frederick Knab, *The Mosquitoes of North and Central America and the West Indies*, vol. 1 (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1912), 117. Sir Maxim explains that although the scientific journal to which he initially sent his account found it to be "too stupid," recent interest in the phenomenon of mosquito sound gave him new encouragement to publish.

14 Howard et al., vol.1, 116–17.

15 "An Electrical Mosquito Trap," *Science* 76, no. 1978 (25 November 1932): 12.

16 "An Electrical Mosquito Trap," 12.

17 Offenhauser and Kahn, "The Sounds of Disease-Carrying Mosquitoes," 62–63.

18 Louis M. Roth, "A Study of Mosquito Behavior. An Experimental Laboratory Study of the Sexual Behavior of Aedes Aegypti (Linnaeus)," *The American Midland Naturalist* 40, no. 2 (1948): 344.

19 Roth, "A Study of Mosquito Behavior," 344.

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the potential to gently eschew the destruction of carefully balanced ecosystems that insecticides threatened. Published only two years after the dwarves' cheerful onscreen spraying of oil and Paris green in *The Winged Scourge*, Kahn et al.'s article from 1945 frames their experimentation with recording mosquito sound in terms of a need to rethink society's reliance on insecticides, emphasising the potentially dangerous environmental consequences of the compound DDT:

> D.D.T. destroys a variety of insects both harmful and beneficial so that the problem of disturbing the biological balance such as the interference with pollenizing insects, for instance, must be taken into consideration […]. In order to circumvent these objections, we have approached the problem of mosquito destruction from a somewhat novel angle. It occurred to us that mosquitoes might have characteristic "mating calls." If so, these characteristic sounds, if properly recorded and satisfactorily produced, might aid in the attraction of mosquitoes to their death.[20]

The same line of argument is briefly taken up by biologist and environmentalist Rachel Carson in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Carson likewise touches on sonic traps—and then also ultrasonic sound—as examples of technologies that might target mosquitoes more precisely and thus better protect the environment from the ham-fisted spreading of chemicals over land and buildings.[21] However, missing from Kahn et al.'s article but present in *Silent Spring* is the pressing issue of mosquitoes' growing resistance to insecticides, including DDT. In the latter, Carson notes that "resistance to insecticides by mosquitoes of the anophelene group has surged upward at an astounding rate […]. In 1956, only 5 species of these mosquitoes displayed resistance; by early 1960 the number had risen from 5 to 28!"[22] For Carson, control measures such as sonic lures and deterrents that avoid doubling down on new toxic chemicals are of paramount importance since they offer a crucial escape route from the dual trap of impending environmental collapse and the increasing scale of disease epidemics.

As one of the first writings to directly articulate a relationship between more precise modes of mosquito management and scientists' greater curiosity about the mosquito as a dynamic, interacting organism, *Silent Spring* sets a precedent for the future of vector-borne disease prevention. Carson supports "biological solutions" to mosquitoes—solutions "based on understanding of the living organisms they seek to control, and of the whole fabric of life to which they belong."[23] Here, she advocates for a kind of knowledge about mosquito control that, somewhat paradoxically, makes greater room for mosquito agency. What this knowledge affords, she argues, is the potential instrumentalization of

20 Kahn et al., "Recording of Sounds," 335.
21 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 40th anniversary ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 287.
22 Carson, 268.
23 Ibid., 276–77.

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mosquito life towards a project of mosquito control: these alternative methods "seek to turn the strength of a species against itself—to use the drive of an insect's life forces to destroy it."[24] In the case of sound-based technologies of mosquito control, the strength being exploited is the fundamental importance of sound to mosquito mating habits, which, as Andrés et al. note, makes these technologies "relatively 'evolution-proof'"[25] compared to insecticides while simultaneously ensuring the mosquito's predicable manipulation to the achievement of human ends.

Harmonic convergences in Mosquitopia

Published in 1948, Roth's doubts about the effectiveness of sonic traps seem to have been shared by future authorities on mosquito control since the use of sound to lure and kill mosquitoes was not pursued further in any significant capacity, despite its endorsement by Carson. Nevertheless, mosquito sound and mosquito sonic lives remain important to contemporary mosquito-control strategies and their development. Today, research on luring traps contributes to the advancement of mosquito-population monitoring techniques within studies of other mosquito-control strategies.[26] Researchers are even reversing their siren songs to explore the potential of musical mosquito deterrents. For instance, Dieng et al.'s 2019 study shows how playing electronic dance music (specifically, Skrillex's "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites") through a loudspeaker reduces *Aedes* mosquito mating and biting;[27] here, similar to sonic traps, pitched sound is employed to decrease unwanted contact between human and mosquito populations.

Many recent studies on mosquito sound, however, find their relevance beyond the development of sound-based mosquito-control technologies. Like sound traps, gene-drive technologies aim to harness the agency of mosquitoes in the control of mosquito populations; in this respect, experiments with sound traps and mosquito musicking carried out in the first half of the 20th century appear to help lay the conceptual foundations for the development of gene drives as a

24 Ibid., 277.

25 Marta Andrés et al., "Buzzkill: Targeting the Mosquito Auditory System," *Current Opinion in Insect Science* 40 (August 2020): 15.

26 Andrés et al., "Buzzkill," 13–14; Brian J. Johnson and Scott A. Ritchie, "The Siren's Song: Exploitation of Female Flight Tones to Passively Capture Male *Aedes Aegypti* (Diptera: Culicidae)," *Journal of Medical Entomology* 53, no. 1 (January 2016): 245–48.

27 Hamady Dieng et al., "The Electronic Song 'Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites' Reduces Host Attack and Mating Success in the Dengue Vector Aedes Aegypti," *Acta Tropica* 194 (June 2019): 93–99.

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strategy of mosquito control. Gene drives work by increasing the likelihood of humanly-engineered genes inserted into the genome of individual mosquitoes being inherited by each new generation and are designed to disrupt either the reproduction of the mosquito (a suppression gene drive) or its ability to harbour a particular disease pathogen (a replacement gene drive).[28] This technology therefore "hacks" mosquitoes' reproduction in order to decrease the likelihood of vector-borne diseases being spread by the next generation. Moreover, while the application of gene drives seems, at first, to be distantly removed from concerns relating to mosquito sound, it is to these technologies that research on mosquito sound now turns since a greater understanding of mosquitoes' production of and responsiveness to sound in their musicking with other mosquitoes may, in fact, help increase gene drives' effectiveness in the context of mosquito control. For instance, recent research has shown that female mosquitoes not only attract male mosquitoes to mate by sonic means, but that females and males also mutually adjust their flying before they mate in order to match the frequencies of the resonant harmonics of their flight tones.[29] It is not yet clear what exact purpose is served by this process, but entomologists suppose that this sonic interaction between mosquitoes—what is commonly termed "harmonic convergence"—may be important to mate selection[30] or to the mechanics of in-flight copulation.[31] Either way, in order to better assess the effectiveness of humanly-engineered gene drives, it will be necessary to understand further how harmonic convergence shapes mating success and the inheritance of certain genes.[32] If a suppression gene drive is the goal, then harmonic convergence might become a primary target of disruption in this regard;[33] on the other hand, if a replacement

28 Ramya M. Rajagopalan, "Designer Mosquitoes?: Prospects and Precautions of Genome-Edited Insects for Public Health," in *Mosquitopia: The Place of Pests in a Healthy World*, ed. Marcus Hall and Dan Tamïr (London; New York: Routledge, 2022), 238.

29 Gabriella Gibson and Ian Russell, "Flying in Tune: Sexual Recognition in Mosquitoes," *Current Biology* 16, no. 13 (July 2006): 1311–16; Lauren J. Cator et al., "Harmonic Convergence in the Love Songs of the Dengue Vector Mosquito," *Science* 323, no. 5917 (20 February 2009): 1077–79; Cédric Pennetier et al., "'Singing on the Wing' as a Mechanism for Species Recognition in the Malarial Mosquito Anopheles Gambiae," *Current Biology* 20, no. 2 (January 2010): 131–36; Andrew Aldersley et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Harmonic Convergence in Mosquito Auditory Interactions," *Journal of The Royal Society Interface* 13, no. 117 (April 2016): 20151007.

30 Lauren J. Cator and Laura C. Harrington, "The Harmonic Convergence of Fathers Predicts the Mating Success of Sons in Aedes Aegypti," *Animal Behaviour* 82, no. 4 (October 2011): 627–33.

31 Gibson and Russell, "Flying in Tune," 1314.

32 Cator and Harrington, "Harmonic Convergence of Fathers," 632.

33 Andrés et al., "Buzzkill," 15.

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gene drive is to be achieved, then harmonic convergence will need to remain undisturbed in spite of changes to the mosquitoes' DNA.[34]

Returning to the representation of mosquito agency in *Camping Out*, it appears that the mosquitoes' unison buzzing (narratively framed as a defensive expression of their communality) as well as the boy mosquito's participatory musicking in the film are not as fantastical or as anthropomorphic as they might initially seem. Proving that mosquitoes actively co–constitute their harmonic convergences by modulating their flight tones in response to other individual mosquitoes, some entomologists, predictably, have come to refer to the interaction as a duet[35] or even a love song[36] since, like musicians, mosquitoes are not only sensitive to sound, but also responsive to it in their own soundings. Nevertheless, the participatory mosquito musicking represented in the film is still charged with the kind of antagonism that anthropomorphically imagines mosquitoes as inherently vindictive in their attack against humankind: the boy mosquito irritates Mickey during his song by flying offensively close to his face; likewise, the swarm's buzzing never escapes its nature as an expression of frenzied fury over the intruders. In this one sense, *Camping Out* paves the way for *The Winged Scourge's* representation of mosquitoes as a pest; yet, simultaneously, what the later film appears to abandon in its imagination of a pest-free utopia is the former's recognition of mosquito lives beyond the human.

One aim of the environmental humanities' study of pest control has been to denaturalize this figure of the pest. Writing about human–rat relations, Gabriela Jarzębowska both historicizes the representation of urban rat control as a war between species and suggests thinking about rats not as enemies but as "ecological adversaries" to humans; this conceptual move, she argues, may help to nurture more critical approaches to conceptualizing and enacting pest control.[37] Marcus Hall and Dan Tamïr make a similar point in the introductory chapter of their co-edited book *Mosquitopia: The Place of Pests in a Healthy World.* The editors sidestep an imagined set of futures defined by the binary of mosquito and human victories and wonder instead at the possibility of their title's "Mosquitopia,"[38] which they define as "a balanced relationship between ourselves and our main insect adversary that can permit us to both survive and prosper into the next

34 Christine M. Reitmayer et al., "Sex, Age, and Parental Harmonic Convergence Behavior Affect the Immune Performance of Aedes Aegypti Offspring," *Communications Biology* 4, no. 1 (December 2021): 6.

35 Aldersley et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Harmonic Convergence."

36 Cator et al., "Harmonic Convergence."

37 Gabriela Jarzębowska, "Follow the Rat. From Necropolitics to A Theory of Interspecies Cohabitation," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 15, no. 3 (2018): 15; for a discussion of control in animal training, see Justyna Włodarczyk, *Genealogy of Obedience: Reading North American Dog Training Literature, 1850s–2000s* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

38 Hall and Tamïr, *Mosquitopia*, 4.

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epoch."[39] Hall and Tamïr's chapter recognises the numerous risks to seeking complete mosquito extermination—including ecological, health, and economic risks as well as the greater ineffectiveness of such a strategy in preventing vector-borne disease[40]—and so shifts the conversation to less final solutions. This shift is subtle, however, for while mosquito deaths are still deemed necessary, and while a number of reasons for pursuing mosquito extermination are explored by Hall and Tamïr,[41] it is the end goal that changes in the pursuit of Mosquitopia. The new aim is not to learn how to achieve a life *without* mosquitoes, but to learn how to live *with* them—and to "become with" them[42]—in ways that continue indefinitely to navigate mosquito buzzing and biting; as Hall and Tamïr argue, achieving Mosquitopia also means "acknowledging the benefits and rights of our pathogens, parasites and predators (large and small), and then adjusting our lives and lifestyles to make room for them."[43]

Artists who compose the sonic world of Mosquitopia implicate the insect's sound within this project of rethinking the mosquito. Under their "reasons for saving mosquitoes,"[44] Hall and Tamïr note the "aesthetic dimension" of the insect's life, emphasising its sound most of all and the insects' harmonic convergence, specifically.[45] Their chapter then cites a BBC news clip about a gallery installation by Swiss artist Robin Meier and Iranian-American artist Ali Momeni titled *Truce: Strategies for Post-Apocalyptic Computation* in which mosquito sound plays a primary role. First presented in Minneapolis in 2009, *Truce* amplifies the buzzing of three mosquitoes and projects their live image onto a screen; these mosquitoes sonically respond and are responded to by a computer singing a series of tones inspired by *Dhrupad*—a North Indian tradition of vocal music. The mosquitoes' buzzing triggers the computer to produce the *Dhrupad* pitches, which move in and out of harmony with an initial stimulus tone; however, whether the tones create harmony or dissonance depends on the mosquitoes' ability to tune their own buzzing to the pitch of the initial stimulus. The effect is a gradually shifting sonic texture as the mosquitoes tire or as they are affected by human visitors to the space; the visitors are encouraged to exhale on

39 Ibid., 10.
40 Ibid., 5–7.
41 Ibid., 8–10.
42 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 208; Vinciane Despret, "The Body We Care for: Figures of Anthropo-Zoo-Genesis," *Body & Society* 10, no. 2–3 (June 2004), 122.
43 Hall and Tamïr, *Mosquitopia*, 10.
44 Ibid., 5.
45 Ibid., 7.

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the mosquitoes, thereby exciting them, or to offer a finger on which they can rest.[46]

As introduced by Meier and Momeni in the BBC clip, *Truce* takes its inspiration from entomologists Gabriella Gibson and Ian Russell's 2006 paper in which the harmonic convergence of mating mosquitoes is first identified and described.[47] The artists challenge conventionally negative attitudes towards the mosquito by foregrounding the musical agency of its three insects as they attempt to perform harmonic convergence and by asking members of the public to gently participate in the process. What emerges from *Truce's* composed system is a new kind of encounter between humans and mosquitoes, whose common musicality enables the temporary replacement of interspecies war for a musically evidenced moment of interspecies harmony—a truce.[48] Here, musicality becomes the neutral ground of mosquitoes and humans: it is a place for the human to nurture greater curiosity about the insect and where mosquito sound transforms into a more neutral (although not entirely innocent) ecological kind of sounding.

It is perhaps ironic that entomological research into mosquito sound should inspire a work such as *Truce*, for Meier and Momeni's interest in transspecies creativity seems to be at odds with modern science's pursuit of greater efficiency in mosquito eradication—a project to which the entomological study of the mosquito is inescapably tied. Indeed, seeking further knowledge about how to increase the efficiency of mosquito control leads to an unexpected effect—one engendered by Meier and Momeni's work—which is the growing respect for mosquitoes as fellow actors in a complex, fragile, buzzing ecology. The question here is no longer what might be gained from the demise of the mosquito, but what, instead, might be won through "healthy cohabitation" with the insect.[49] As *Truce* seems to contend, harmony and dissonance (manifested musically in the work) are not only integral to the sustainability of ethical and ecological systems in which mosquitoes and humans are entangled; the organization of sustainable mosquito–human relations also provides greater opportunities through which humans might develop an ability to hear the world, including its dangers, in terms of opportunities for play—musical play—and to subsequently transform themselves in the face of what might otherwise be feared and dominated. By

46 "Can the Buzz of Mosquitoes Be Art?," BBC News, 2013, online video, 03:33, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-24766729.

47 Gibson and Russell, "Flying in Tune."

48 Truce, as a concept offering a productive model on which to base relations between human and nonhuman animals, is developed further by Dinesh Wadiwel in the concluding chapter of his book *The War against Animals*. See Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals*, Critical Animal Studies, volume 3 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 273–96.

49 Hall and Tamïr, *Mosquitopia*, 4.

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engaging in musical play with mosquitoes—by listening musically and responding musically—could we perhaps nurture an approach to life that is better able to defuse antagonisms built on fear of the Other, the enemy, and what is deemed inherently irredeemable?

Ambivalence and the buzzing mosquito

It is important to stress the specificity of the narrative presented above regarding the entangled contribution of scientific knowledge about mosquitoes and their sounds and artistic representations of mosquito–human relations through sound. This account describes a situation in the global north where most mosquito control research takes place but where populations are also least at risk from vector-borne diseases.[50] In more tropical climates, learning to live with mosquitoes and to navigate the dangers of vector-borne diseases is already a reality that shapes the way mosquito control is practised. For instance, in contrast to the pursuit of efficiency that motivates modern forms of mosquito control, community-led programs of mosquito control in Nicaragua envision the job of killing mosquitoes as "never quite complete," which, in turn, fosters greater attentiveness and curiosity about how to live together in a world shaped not only by humans but also by mosquitoes.[51] This everyday practice of mosquito control emerges not from institutionalized sources of privilege but from bottom-up, lived experiences negotiated alongside mosquitoes in ways that are conducive to the process of sustainable community. As anthropologist Alex Nading writes of his experience alongside these community health workers in Nicaragua: "Mosquitoes were never fully eradicated, just as *comunidad* [community] was never fully realized […]. Openness came not from the anticipated triumph of eradication but from the ambiguity and darkness of human–mosquito intimacy."[52]

The "partiality"[53] that characterises the kind of mosquito control performed in Nicaragua also informs the politics of Vivian Caccuri's *Mosquito Shrine II*, which views the mosquito with a similar ambivalence. Introduced at the beginning of this essay, *Mosquito Shrine II's* accompanying film uses footage from both *The Winged Scourge* and *Camping Out.* Animated body language, including a wink and thumbs up to the camera, contrast Caccuri's script, which articulates connections between the colonial settlement of Latin America, depictions of mosquitoes as criminals and human undesirables, and Latin Americans' simulta-

50 Rajagopalan, "Designer Mosquitoes?," 241.
51 Alex Nading, "Eradication against Ambivalence," in *Mosquitopia: The Place of Pests in a Healthy World*, ed. Marcus Hall and Dan Tamïr (London; New York: Routledge, 2022), 190.
52 Nading, "Eradication Against Ambivalence," 190.
53 Nading, 191.

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neous hatred of and complicity with the mosquito. Throughout the film, contrapuntal, buzzing mosquito sounds filtered through digital editing software transform into and interpolate the whirring, erratic pitches of a synthesized soundtrack.

Like the Nicaraguan mosquito control workers and Nading, Caccuri foregrounds ambivalence towards the mosquito in a move that resists the representation of the mosquito as an enemy to humanity that must be fully eradicated. Of interest here is Caccuri's use of sound within her deconstruction of a post-mosquito utopian narrative—one that promises transcendence through modernity's silencing of the mosquito. Firstly, the haphazard, almost amateurish arrangement of beats, synths, and mosquito buzzing in the soundtrack echoes Nading's observation that, when it comes to the killing of mosquitoes in Nicaragua, it is really "the thought that counts."[54] As introduced above, for Nading and the community health workers, the effectiveness of killing mosquitoes with regard to public health is actually dependent on its relative *ineffectiveness* as a means to completely eradicate and thus silence the mosquito. Similarly, the soundtrack's mosquitoes seem to resist Caccuri's digital manipulation, even as this manipulation is articulated through the altered quality of their sounds. Unruly in their sliding, fading, sudden interruptions, and cessations, the sounds of the mosquitoes do not co-ordinate with the visuals in any obviously predictable manner. Hence, despite Caccuri's sonic integration of mosquitoes into her film, this integration remains unsystematized as an effect of the film's acknowledgement of mosquito agency. Accordingly, *Mosquito Shrine II* represents a kind of indeterminacy with respect to the human's control over the mosquito—an indeterminacy that, for Nading, drives healthy communality as a sustainable process.

Secondly, Caccuri's identification with the mosquito—most noticeable in her video's thumbnail image, which shows Caccuri with mosquito wings and legs—parallels the kind of human–nonhuman "commensalism" identified by Béné dicte Boisseron in the context of the Caribbean Creole dog as a "poetics of postcolonial resistance."[55] This commensalism also figures in *Mosquito Shrine II's* soundtrack as the blurring of categorizations of sound, particularly towards the end of the film when a digitally lowered mosquito hum warbles in disguise, taking on a more recognisably human musical timbre than the film's previous mosquito sounds. Moreover, the lack of direct correspondence between mosquito sound and visuals in Caccuri's film creates an ambiguous impression for the viewer about the source of the sounds they are hearing. For instance, on

54 Nading, 190.

55 Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xxiii.

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experiencing the film, it might be unclear to the viewer at first whether they are listening to fictional mosquitoes or to real mosquitoes buzzing around their ears. Unlike the two Disney films in which mosquito sounds are tied either to mosquitoes behind the screen or to a human's musical imaginary, there is no clear visual indication as to the origins of the mosquito sounds in *Mosquito Shrine II*, and, consequently, no clear sign that the mosquitoes to which the viewer listens are fully under human control. Hovering equivocally somewhere between reality and fantasy, Caccuri's mosquitoes escape detection while managing to remain threateningly present as sound. Thus, oxymoronically embodied in the film's ephemeral soundtrack—and so transcending a killable physical form—Caccuri's mosquitoes amplify not only mosquitoes' resistive power against the European colonizers invoked in the film, but also the resistive power of Latin Americans: "If you want to succeed," she advises, "be a mosquito."[56]

Conclusions

Shaped at the nexus of mosquito control practices and cultural representations of the insect, the meanings and affordances assigned to mosquito sound have accumulated in often contradictory ways since the insect was first linked to the spread of malaria in the final years of the 19th century. The four examples of the mosquito's sonic rendering in the films and audio-visual artworks discussed above are testament to the different hearings of mosquitoes that have emerged alongside shifting ideas and practices of mosquito control: in *The Winged Scourge*, the mosquito's solo whine is presented as the sound of a hostile alien foe—a disruptive buzz that must be edited out of nature. While still a sound of hostility in *Camping Out*, the mosquito buzz unites mosquitoes and is wielded by the insects as sonically interactive bodies. The two more recent sonic representations of mosquitoes follow *Camping Out's* example with respect to the mosquito's interrelational sonic agency; however, these works also depart from its depiction of mosquito buzzing as an inherently antagonistic herald of war. In *Truce*, mosquito sound no longer stands in for the mosquito's status as enemy to humanity since buzzing, here, is a kind of mutual resonation that calibrates a point of "harmonic convergence" between the human and mosquito as ecological kin. Finally, Caccuri's mosquitoes buzz in resistance to their control by colonizing humans, who have exerted power over the Other—insect and human—not only through chemicals, terraforming, and traps, but through their filmic representation.

56 Caccuri, *Mosquito Shrine II*, 00:05–00:08.

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My essay began by comparing *The Winged Scourge* and *Camping Out*—two Disney films produced a decade apart. Of the two films, it is the latter that represents the mosquito and its sounding in ways that resonate with mosquito control's re-imagination of human–mosquito relations through sound. Hearing mosquito sound not as the solo incomprehensible buzzing of some alien parasite but as a collective ecological sounding—an intercommunication—made by agential beings has afforded new ways to directly and efficiently target the mosquito in the 20th and 21st centuries, first through sound traps and then through gene-drive technologies. These methods aim to exploit the life processes of the mosquito in order to control it while simultaneously avoiding collateral damage to other forms of life and the increasing resistance of mosquitoes to the chemicals designed to kill them. Yet, as musicking with mosquitoes transforms mosquito sound into something more discernible—even harmonious—the best action to take with respect to the protection of human lives becomes, in contrast, a little more difficult to discern, for who is it that we really need protecting from: the minority of mosquitoes who carry disease or, rather, the minority of humans with God-like ambitions to alter the ecology and even the DNA of certain mosquito species? Are mosquitoes a human foe, complicit with the diseases they carry, or a human ally with whom we live in delicate ecological balance? At once an irritation, an index of species and sex, a battle cry, a trap, a love song to be prevented, a harmonisation to nurture, and a symbol of human control (both total and incomplete), mosquito sound acts as a flexible apparatus with which relations between the human and the mosquito may be drawn and re-drawn.

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Animal Autobiography and Rajesh Parameswaran's "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)"

Abstract
This paper examines Rajesh Parameswaran's short story "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," which depicts a portion of animal autobiography that has been edited and translated by a human being. Karla Armbruster notes that the form of the animal autobiography reveals a desire to "understand the otherness of non-human life, even if this desire is… absorbed back into the human tendency to gaze…at our own reflection." By offering a close reading of the text which draws on historical representations of the figure of the elephant, as well as the sociological framework of "chipping in" and "butting in," this paper examines authorship as a site of exploitation, and of its role in examining the complexities of the power dynamics inherent within the human gaze on an animal subject.
Keywords: Ecocriticism, animal studies, authorship, anthropocentrism, multispecies future

Timothy Morton writes, somewhat tongue in cheek, that "[a] functional definition of an adult book is one in which nonhumans don't speak and aren't on an equal footing with humans."[1] He refers to the boundary between humans and animals at the level of communication and solidarity, and names this boundary as anthropocentrism.[2] The literature of "talking animals" has indeed mostly been associated with children's literature, as highlighted by Margo DeMello in the introduction to *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*.[3] However, DeMello also notes that in more recent years, talking animals in literature have increasingly been "allowed to speak for themselves, demonstrating a new awareness of animal subjectivity, and a desire on the part of many animal lovers to give that subjectivity a voice."[4] Jessica K. Weir describes the boundary between human and animal as "separation thinking" which "denies our co-

1 Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), 15.
2 Morton, *Humankind*, 14.
3 Margo DeMello, "Introduction," in *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
4 DeMello, *Speaking for Animals*, 4.

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produced realities, our life sustaining connections with sentient others, and leaves no grounds for us to engage with ecological life in ethical terms."[5] A counter to this, she suggests, is "acknowledging our shared past, present, and future with the many species and environments where we live."[6]

The form of the animal autobiography appears to offer a way towards this, though not without some points of difficulty. Karla Armbruster, for example, argues that

> a yearning to genuinely know the otherness of nonhuman animals runs through most, if not all, talking animal stories, as well as the motivations of their readers, even if this desire is sometimes almost completely overshadowed by or absorbed back into the human tendency to gaze – whether lovingly or critically – at our own reflection when we look at other animals.[7]

Through a close reading of Rajesh Parameswaran's short story, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," I shall examine whether or not the piece escapes the reflexiveness of the human gaze.

Ostensibly a piece of autobiographical writing by an elephant narrator named Shanti, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" is split into two narratives. Shanti's story, written in the language of "Englaphant," describes her early life in the wild until her capture by poachers. This is the 'main' text which is accompanied by footnotes from an unnamed human character who acts as the text's editor and translator (I will refer to this character from now on simply as "the editor"). These footnotes purport to be "elucidating asides": additions included by the editor that will supposedly enhance Shanti's original tale.[8] He even appears to ruminate on the potential of Shanti's story for cross-species relations: "[…] will her story be a singular and bizarre anomaly, a blip in the stream of popular culture, a moment of pure novelty? Or will her tale bear a meaning beyond its facts? Will it become a culture-shifting event, a water-shed in the conjoined histories of our two species?"[9] Thus, the precise aims of the editor appear to be aligned with DeMello's observation of how the literature of talking animals seems to respond to the recognition of animal subjectivity, and the desire to give it a voice.

5 Jessica K. Weir, "Lives in Connection," in *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene,* ed. Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, Ruth Fincher (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2015), 17.

6 Weir, "Lives in Connection," 17.

7 Karla Armbruster, "What Do We Want from Talking Animals?: Reflections on Literary Representations of Animal Voices and Minds," in *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.

8 Rajesh Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," in *I am an Executioner: Love Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 186.

9 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 188.

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The particular use of animal autobiography as a short story rather than a novel is of interest. Unlike novels, short stories offer only a snapshot or a glimpse of a specific place, a specific subject. In fact, the very first line of the story is "I do not have much time, so I must dispense with the obvious."[10] The urgency of Shanti's portion of the text lends itself well to a short format. Often, in the words of Clare Hanson, short stories have an "open quality" in which "we accept a degree of mystery, elision, uncertainty […] as we would not in the novel."[11] Indeed, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" is a story in which much hinges on uncertainty and elision.

Throughout this paper, I refer to David Herman's work on "chipping in" and "butting in", which borrows from Deborah Schiffrin's sociological work relating to the framing of discourse as either "speaking for" or "speaking over."[12] Like Herman suggests, the terms are useful for considering the framing of power dynamics between human and animal voices. Here, I suggest that the human editor initially assumes the role of someone who is "chipping in": "one signals that one shares so much with another discourse participant that one can take up his or her position in talk, building solidarity." However, later, it becomes apparent that he is "butting in": "engaging in a violation of negative politeness requirements or negative face wants, whereby one fails to respect another's desire not to be intruded upon, threatening solidarity."[13] Karla Armbruster identifies this as a problematic area within the form of the animal autobiography, though does not make the same distinction between "speaking for" or "speaking over":

> Any text that gives voice to a nonhuman animal is a case of speaking for others, a mode of discourse that has been extensively examined and debated within feminist (and postcolonial) theory and criticism. The practice of speaking for others, even when undertaken with the best of intentions, carries a real danger of misrepresentation and, in particular, of erasing difference, of turning the other into the same.[14]

This raises the question of the editor's intention in "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)." As I shall outline below, the editor's intentions are often unclear throughout the text. The reader is often left with vaguely inferred or outright contradictory information with which to guess at his main goal.

For example, as the editor's footnotes progress, it becomes evident that he is something of an unreliable narrator in the model of Charles Kinbote, the apparent editor of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. "Elephants in Captivity (Part

10 Ibid., 186.

11 Clare Hanson, "Things out of Words: Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction," in *Re-reading the Short Story*, ed. Clare Hanson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 23–25.

12 David Herman, *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 176.

13 Herman, *Narratology Beyond the Human*, 176–177.

14 Armbruster, "What Do We Want from Talking Animals?," 23.

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One)" shares *Pale Fire*'s structure of a piece of original work (John Shade's original poem "Pale Fire") accompanied by editorial footnotes by Kinbote's footnotes. There is indeed an explicit reference to Kinbote towards the end of the Parameswaran's story: "The preceding sentence, while sincere, is also a paraphrase of my dear Charles Kinbote, in whose footnotes my own footsteps suicidally follow."[15]

"Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" also shares *Pale Fire*'s subversion of authorship as a site of authority. Just like Charles Kinbote, the unnamed editor of "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" borrows the scholarly apparatus of reference and commentary, and claims to be an expert in the scholarly field of "Englaphant" and animal-human social relations. Interspersed between the three elements that make up the editor's narrative, which I shall outline below, the editor includes historical references and textual analysis which purport to contextualise Shanti's story within a recorded history of human-elephant contact. For example, he refers to a memoir by 'William Blacktusk', an elephant with a human father. This, as with Shanti's tale, was written in Englaphant; partially translated, it is "available only to a small group of scholars, namely myself."[16] Such references are accompanied by references to real-life texts, such as *Fear of the Animal Planet* by Justin Hribal, published by Counterpunch in 2010. The editor includes these references in order to strengthen the appearance of his self-described expertise on Shanti's tale and the field of human-elephant relations, as well as enhancing the reader's sense of immersion in the story.

The editor positions himself as a translator of Shanti's story from Englaphant into English, but does not provide much information about the language. We are initially led to believe that it is a written language with a fairly considerable history: "[…] Shanti [is] in a long line of great Englaphant writers, starting with the master Ganesha, who wrote the entire Ramayana in an Indo-European precursor of Englaphant, with the ink-dipped, broken-off tip of his right tusk." In the same footnote we are also told that Englaphant sprang up in areas of human-elephant contact, though the editor doesn't explicitly name where those areas are, or indeed how such a language emerged from them.[17] Later in the story, the editor's description of his communication with Shanti suggests a contradiction with his earlier claim that "Englaphant" is a language with a long history:

> So many afternoons I stood outside the elephant enclosure in that vast, decrepit menagerie in that distant borough, eating someone else's discarded caramel corn, gazing into the elephant enclosure and watching, with keen eye, the flicks of tail and flops of ear, which, to the casual watcher, were simply random tics; listening to the hiccups,

15 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 220.
16 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 200–201.
17 Ibid., 186.

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> harrumphs, trumpets, and brays which I knew to be clear and intentional messages from the elephants to each other and (more pertinently) to me – the first buds of a blossoming Englaphant.[18]

This is evidently a rather one-sided form of communication, with plenty of scope for misinterpretation. One wonders if the Englaphant claimed to be spoken between Shanti and the editor would be intelligible to speakers of Englaphant spoken elsewhere. Here, the internal logic of the editor's claims about Englaphant begin to break down. When taken in the context of the editor's overall unreliability, it does not seem likely that a two-way conversation is taking place between them. Rather, it is more likely that the editor is scrutinising Shanti and interpreting her smallest gestures in a way which suits his own personal need for connection. When compared to Shanti's description of her native form of communication, it becomes clear that the editor's communications with Shanti do not embody one crucial element:

> Among ourselves, we elephants did not talk in words like those with which I now write this. We made noises, a broad range of them: grunts, whispers, low rumbles, earsplitting trumpets, but we used them not as words. We made motions with our bodies as well – with our trunks, our ears, our legs, our eyes, with the angle of our heads – but these motions did not have distinct meanings. These gestures of body and sound were the stuff of our communication, yet they did not themselves constitute our speech. The source of our understanding, the substance of our message, lay in something broader and more round, a circle of intention that surrounded each of us and the herd. When we were together in the herd, we shared an understanding, concrete and actual; each of us felt with certainty what other individuals expressed to us, and moreover, we understood as a herd what the herd thought and felt.[19]

The "circle of intention" that Shanti describes here seems to be missing from the editor's description of their conversations. There is no sense of shared understanding between them, and thus no sense of even a metaphorical, multispecies "herd," the kind of thing in which Donna Haraway may locate the potential for "making oddkin": "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations […]. We become-with each other, or not at all."[20] Rather, the editor appears to be using Shanti for his own sense of becoming – a notion distinct from Haraway's "becoming-with," which implies a sense of connectivity in contrast to the separation implied in "becoming": "becoming" is always "becoming-with."[21]

The editor does not describe himself communicating with Shanti; he only receives and interprets messages from her. Thus, the reader has no idea whether

18 Ibid., 218.

19 Ibid., 191.

20 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

21 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

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or not Shanti in turn scrutinises the editor's gestures in search of meaning, and so, in addition to her voice, her intention is overwritten by the editor.

Much like Kinbote, the editor of "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)" does not offer much explication of the main text, and his unreliability becomes obvious as the story progresses. The footnotes rapidly develop into a parallel narrative that consists of three elements.

The first provides some information about Shanti's life post-capture, and initially appear to be on the "chipping in" end of the interactional spectrum. These footnotes are comparatively short, and provide virtually no details about her life in captivity prior to contact with the editor. We do learn, however, that she has recently escaped the Silver Brothers Circus where she was put on display, and is currently on a rampage in the city where the editor lives.[22] The editor claims Shanti wrote a portion of her tale at some point after her escape, "while all around the world people watched transfixed, while all around her crumbled a city she had inadvertently reduced to chaos."[23]

The second element consists of dialogues, written in the form of a stage-play, between the characters of the main story. These are presented as details which have been overlooked by Shanti, and which will only enrich the reader's understanding of her story. The editor even suggests that the reader should first familiarise themself with Shanti's story before reading the footnotes.[24] However, these bear little relation to the story Shanti has recounted, and there is no evidence, aside from the editor's own presumed authority, for their veracity.

For example, Shanti writes only briefly of the death of Ania, the matriarch of the herd:

> Ania left us during the long drought, when my aunts' skin hung loose on their jutting, angular hip bones, and the hard, ugly shapes of their skulls protruded from behind their kind faces. Ania always had faith in the old grazing fields. We all did. But one day she left us, and Mother remained the dominant female in the herd.[25]

Though brief, this passage points quite straightforwardly to drought and the failure of ancestral grazing fields as the cause of Ania's death. However, the editor's footnotes insist that Ania was tricked by Shanti's mother, Amuta, into leaving the safety of the herd, towards a roaming tiger. I have room to quote only a fraction of the dialogues. Here, Amuta has just persuaded Ania to leave the herd, and is listening the tiger attack her "off stage":

> AMUTA: […]
> Now I hear the tigress growling. […] Hear the anguish in Ania's voice? Sounds of

22 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 187.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 186.
25 Ibid., 192.

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> gnashing and of chewing, crunch of bone and gurgle of blood, unheard-of and unnatural elephant cries. […] Does she realize, as she dies, that her death was by design? Oh, but why let it worry you, Amuta? What weight does an accusation carry that echoes in the empty air, and falls on the ear of no elephant but me? Now Ania's words are garbled, her moans weaken. […] I am alone in this, and afraid, for this is treachery that goes against nature! But then, treachery always does. Every leader must act alone, challenging her very nature that her nature may be realized. Go on now, wipe the distress from your eyes. Walk proudly back to the herd. You have done well by them.[26]

These footnotes are by far the lengthiest sections of the editor's narrative. The effect of these can be most readily seen in the print version of Parameswaran's collection. They literally push Shanti's tale off the page, allowing room for only a line or two of her story in between pages and pages of footnotes. Thus, they certainly cannot be said to "chip in" or "speak for" Shanti; they force the reader to totally recalibrate their assumptions from the first reading that they are encouraged to do without reading the footnotes. The language the editor ascribes to Amuta certainly does not align with what little we know of Englaphant: Amuta's dialogue is written in a declamatory, discursive style rather than the fairly clipped style adopted by Shanti; while there are references to "elephant cries," there is no sense of the gesture, sounds, or "circle of intent" that Shanti refers to her in her main text as the core aspects of her language. In other words, the 'elephant-ness' of her speech is removed, and resembles something more like a staged human play.

The third element is the editor's own autobiography of sorts, which details his life as an outsider figure in a dysfunctional family. Of particular note is the fact that the editor is biracial, describing his mother and uncle as "the children, I believed, of Holocaust survivors," and his father as "a Chicago-born African American."[27] His parents evidently committed suicide, though the editor insists that this was only an accident: "my parents, died tragically five days before my twelfth birthday. It was a car accident: they parked their car in our closed garage and accidentally left the engine running."[28] Later, the editor's grandmother commits suicide as well, "using the long cloth cord of the new electric iron my parents had gifted her on her seventieth birthday."[29] Much of his family life is shrouded in vagueness, and many of the editor's conclusions are inferred rather than stated explicitly. He writes: "[My parents] carried a secret, the two of them – a secret, I often believed, that revolved around me. One could see it in their sad eyes, the way they looked at me, and then at each other, knowingly."[30] The nature

26 Ibid., 195–96.
27 Ibid., 202.
28 Ibid., 203.
29 Ibid., 202–203.
30 Ibid., 203.

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of this secret is never revealed. Similarly, he writes "Nana Marina hated animals, and I had always suspected her of poisoning the stray cat that I fed secretly on the back porch."[31]

Taken together, the three elements of the editor's narrative seem to converge on the editor's sense of alienation from his family, and his attempt to create a sense of connection with Shanti. He reveals that he regularly visits Shanti at the circus, and it is there that he began to develop a profound personal connection with her:

> They came toward me, tail in trunk, tail in trunk, linked in that humiliating way circus elephants are always linked, each one moreover individually hobbled by a heavy chain leading from rear left to front right ankle. And I saw something distinct in the eyes of each one. Not just the watery sadness one finds in the eyes of all elephants in captivity, but something more specific, more familiar. And when she approached, I knew immediately that we, too, were linked; that somehow, across space and across time, my trunk was curled round her tail; that somewhere else, wherever I really came from, we had been kin. Once I saw her, I could not part myself from her, each year that the circus was in our city. How could I allow her to live in captivity? Her large ears flapped open, as if to say, *Speak to me!* Her truthful eyes spoke more directly, begging for *a way out*, yes, but more than that, for *freedom*.[32]

In this passage we get the only clear glimpse of Shanti's life in captivity: chained, forced to march "trunk-to-tail" with her fellow captive elephants. Shanti herself provides no details of this part of her life; in her main text she is more concerned with making herself understood: "I write this in order to supply you with those crucial bits of history without which my story cannot be understood."[33] This line, upon which seems to rest the crux of her justification for writing her tale, is one of the few opening sentences which is not accompanied by a footnote. The editor makes no reference at all to this desire and instead considers himself best placed to include the details which will make the story more comprehensible. Before the first of the dialogue footnotes, the editor offers this justification for their inclusion:

> Wouldn't [Shanti] be regretful if the one person most intimate with her life and her tale, well studied in elephant culture and psychology, a writer not untalented in his own right, and who moreover enjoys exclusive access to her text, did not fill in for her those voices and details that she would have felt, on further and deeper reflection, were crucial? While the editor's job is normally to clarify, when duty calls, he must not shy from the role of a sort of *Shamspeare in love*. I humbly comply.[34]

31 Ibid., 211–12.
32 Ibid., 222–23.
33 Ibid., 187.
34 Ibid., 192.

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The glimpse of Shanti in captivity draws upon a familiar cultural image of the captive elephant. The chained elephant was a popular attraction at zoos and circuses, and can be traced to a number of well-known elephants that featured in American circuses throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Jumbo. Jumbo was a celebrated attraction of the London Zoo. He developed into a celebrity due to outcry generated by the zoo's sale of him to the American circus owner P.T. Barnum. He was often photographed in various contexts, notably, as reported by one correspondent in London, "in chains" as well as "in freedom." This, as Susan Nance has pointed out, was an effort by "entrepreneurial Britons to tell Jumbo's story."[35] Nance also points out "[t]he contrast between the apparent romance of working for an adored circus coupled with frequent misery endured behind the scenes."[36]

It is the image of Shanti's captivity that seems to appeal to the editor's sense of alienation. The elephants march towards *him*, he imagines his own "trunk curled round her tail" – a particularly loaded statement, as the editor has previously referred to his own penis as looking exactly like an elephant's trunk. Moreover, it seems to me that there is a wordplay here between "tail" and "tale," inviting the reader to imagine Shanti's tale in the editor's metaphorical grasp.

Shanti writes of an explicit hope of a shared future with humans: "Perhaps, just perhaps, by the time you read this, my misadventure has inspired others to break free as I did. Perhaps we live among you now as friends and neighbors."[37] As mentioned above, the editor does seem to wonder the same thing himself: "Will it become a culture-shifting event, a water-shed in the conjoined histories of our two species?"[38] However, against this hope of Shanti's he does include a footnote:

> What did you expect, Shanti? […] That your calves would study with our children side by side in the same schools, and play with them? That they would be popular in the playground, your elephant children, tossing balls with their trunks, spraying water of a summer's day at their bipedal friends? Did you ever fear, Shanti, that they would instead feel, for the first time, fat, naked, ugly, and odd?[39]

Here, the editor very explicitly rejects the potential of a shared future with elephants as logistically impossible, not to mention their sense of unbelonging within a human-supremacist society. This occurs fairly early in the text, despite his apparent sympathy with Shanti. The suggestion that the elephant calves would feel "ugly and odd" is a telling reference to something the editor writes about

35 Susan Nance, *Animal Modernity: Jumbo the Elephant and the Human Dilemma* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 41.
36 Nance, *Animal Modernity*, 44.
37 Ibid., 188–89.
38 Ibid., 188.
39 Ibid., 189.

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himself: "I suspected some implicit association of the elephant's unwieldy, exaggerated features with my own odd countenance […]"[40] He considers himself ugly, and part of his alienation from the society around him – at school, for example, where he is referred to as "Dumbo," the result of another boy comparing his penis to an elephant's trunk (in the literal sense)[41] – is linked to his own sense of deformity. The editor is projecting his own sense of inferiority onto the hypothetical elephants.

Shanti's body, or the elephant body in general, it must be noted, is described in detail throughout the editor's portion of the text as being thoroughly embedded in the violence of the animal trade: elephants march "tail-in-trunk," they "rememb[er] the beatings inflicted by a particular mahout,"[42] they are "rid[den] for sport,"[43] their likenesses are used as souvenir trinkets and stuffed toys brought back from holidays.[44] The editor's purported empathy with Shanti cannot be detached from her commodification, and he seems unable, or unwilling, to own to this fact. Her early life in the wild, her freedom, is less morally considerable to him than her life in captivity, because it is captivity that has brought them into contact. She exists for him, in other words, only through the mediation of the zoo and the circus.

Stripped of such commodification, the very figure of the elephant in literature presents a forceful challenge to previously-held assumptions about the role of the animal, and animality, in human-animal relations. Parameswaran's depiction of a "rational elephant" (to borrow Laura Brown and Bryan Alkemeyer's term) evokes a literary lineage that extends back to antiquity.[45] Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, which describes the elephant as:

> the nearest to man in intelligence [*sensibus*]: it understands [*intellectus*] the language of its country and obeys orders, remembers duties that it has been taught, is pleased by affection and by marks of honour, nay more it possesses virtues rare even in man, honesty [*probitas*], wisdom [*prudentia*], justice [*aequitas*], also respect [*religio*] for the stars and reverence [*veneratio*] for the sun and moon.[46]

Bryan Alkemeyer identifies the "rational elephant" as a figure with the potential to undercut avowedly anthropocentric texts, and "demolish, unfasten, annul,

40 Ibid., 201–202.
41 Ibid., 200.
42 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 192.
43 Ibid., 201.
44 Ibid., 201.
45 Laura Brown and Bryan Alkemeyer, "Rational Elephants or Hominoid Apes: Which is Early Modern?" *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* No. 4 (Fall 2013), 13.
46 Bryan Alkemeyer, "Remembering the Elephant: Animal Reason before the Eighteenth Century," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (Oct. 2017), 1150.

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delegitimize or subvert the human."[47] Such a subversion is alluded to in the text, referred to through the act of suicide.

By the end of the editor's narrative, we learn that he has decided to end his life, and that he has chosen to do so beside Shanti's enclosure. He laces a soft drink with a powerful tranquiliser. After offering some to Shanti, which she refuses, he drinks the whole thing, and waits for his death. At the last moment, Shanti forces straw down his throat, causing him to vomit, and presses her foot on his chest, restarting his heart. When he asks her – through the presumed medium of Englaphant – why she has saved his life, she responds, "*Why should you die alone on the ground […] when you may die through me?*"[48] This appears to be a cryptic remark, but in fact refers to an earlier, rather protracted footnote, about the subject of suicide. For the editor, suicide appears to be a symbolic, transformative act of self-obliteration, not death. "Suiciders" "pattern their lives on another person's […] then the imitator would go so far as to murder this person, to clear the ground for the performance to begin […] The suicide then became, as far as possible, the other person […]."[49] There is a fine irony in referring to this act as "suicide" whenever it entails the death of the (perhaps unwitting) person that the "suicider" has decided to become.

The editor's failure to act upon transformative potential in Shanti's narrative – a narrative that confirms her individual identity and consciousness and should have had repercussions for human understanding of the natural world – seems deliberately managed in order to expose the failings of the anthropocentric society in which he lives, and of the "separated thinking" by which such a society is marked. The potential for Haraway's "becoming-with" seems decidedly lost. However, the elephant's narrative is preserved. Shanti's original portion remains, with her hopes for a shared future: this, I believe, is the root of the story. Though the editor, while he purports to respect and even empathise with Shanti, ultimately speaks over her, the story gives the reader enough reason to remain suspicious of his motives. When he commits the ultimate act of "speaking over" by assuming, by the end, that she will die for him, and allow him (presumably, though this aspect remains somewhat unclear) to transform into her, it has become clear to the reader that he has engaged in a process of "becoming" without Shanti. Her body, already commodified and subjected to captivity, is identified by the editor as a conduit for his own transformation. What Shanti is, what she wants, is discounted. Thus, authorship becomes a site of oppression and exploitation by the human of the animal other and, by extension, a metaphor for the exploitation of resources and of "othered" beings, human and nonhuman.

47 Alkemeyer, "Remembering the Elephant," 1150.
48 Parameswaran, "Elephants in Captivity (Part One)," 225.
49 Ibid., 220.

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By making all of this visible to the reader through the editor's increasing obvious unreliability, Parameswaran suggests that the shared future that Shanti hopes for is not lost.

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Sutirtho Roy (The University of Calcutta)

The Boy and his Companion Animal: A Post-anthropocentric Reading of Agency in *Flora and Ulysses*, *Free Willy* and *How to Train Your Dragon* Trilogy

Abstract
The friendship between the boy and his dog has long been celebrated as the ideal cross-species dynamic based on mutual trust and reciprocity. However, a post-anthropocentric analysis of its depiction in fiction reveals the subtle power differentials underlying this dynamic. The purpose of this study is to look at how the trope of the boy and his dog transmedially evolved across written and visual narratives to not only afford more agency to the dog but also replace this idealized canine companion with various other species. This paper hopes to analyze three of these narratives – Dreamworks' *How to Train Your Dragon* film trilogy, *Flora and Ulysses* and *Free Willy* – to delineate how the entwined fates of the human child and non-human animal act as sites of interspecies resistance against the activities of human adults. It analyzes the reciprocity of such a relationship, in an effort to gauge the agency afforded to each actant. Finally, this paper portrays the ways in which all three narratives adhere to and subvert the conventions of the genre, and their potential to impact real non-human animals.
Keywords: post-anthropocentric, non-human, companion animal, the-boy-and-his-dog, children's literature

The Timeless Appeal of the Boy and his Dog

The story of the boy and his dog remains one of the oldest and most recurrent narratives of human/non-human bonding in the Western popular imagination. Such a narrative can be traced back to the campfire myth, which Jack London recounts through the dream of his protagonist Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. According to this myth, wild wolves were first drawn to early man's campsite in search of food, which marked the beginning of a mutually interdependent relationship at the "dawn of man's time on Earth, at history's earliest point"[1] to borrow the words the narrator used to describe the dream of his protagonist Buck in the animated adaptation of *The Call of the Wild*. This popular "campfire myth"

1 *The Call of the Wild: Howl, Buck*, directed by Kozo Morishita. (Toei Animation. 1981).

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echoes a desire to transcend anthropogenic boundaries to "become"[2] or "become with"[3] animals, and to a degree, remains rooted in a post-human model of interspecies relationality. London's stories of interspecies bonding in *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) follow opposing trajectories but follow a central theme – the mutual love and affection between a human being and his canine pet.

These stories highlight a specific paradigm of thinking with companion animals and especially dogs at the turn of the twentieth century, which would bear a prominent influence on children's literature by the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. However, while the human beings in London's stories are adult men, many of these later narratives such as *Old Yeller* (1957) and *Big Red* (1962), adapted from the titular novels in 1956 and 1945 respectively, would feature pre-adolescent or adolescent boys who forge connections with their canine companions. This reason behind such a demographic choice becomes relevant in particular ways, as analyzed by Eric L. Tribunella in "A Boy and His Dog: Canine Companions and the Proto-Erotics of Youth." Tribunella writes:

> First, the relationship between a boy and his dog and its representation in literature provide the opportunity for children to practice engaging in affectively charged social relations, if only through reading about them. Second, the narrative of the boy and his dog exemplifies a culturally widespread disciplinary device that involves promoting intense affectional attachments and then demanding their sacrifice as a way of (re)forming social subjects that are properly gendered and sexualized. Third, the relationship between a boy and his dog, characterized by emotional and physical intimacy and providing possibilities of great pleasure for the child, represents a form of childhood sexuality that is often overlooked as such.[4]

This very genre partially borrows its title from Harlan Ellison's 1969 novella *A Boy and His Dog*, which was later adapted into a film in 1975, or perhaps, to a degree, from the 1946 film *A Boy and His Dog*.[5] The former, featuring the bond between a 15-year-old boy Vic and his misanthropic, telepathic and sentient dog Blood in a post-apocalyptic wasteland depicts the aforementioned bond as stronger than any bond Vic can establish with members of his own species. Blood helps Vic search for women through his superior senses, and Vic falls in love with one such girl named Quilla. However, when faced with the choice of saving Quilla or Blood, Vic sacrifices the former and cooks her flesh to feed the latter in a twisted turn of events. As such, Ellison's narrative inverts the trope of demanding a dog's sac-

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 27.

3 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.

4 Eric L. Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog: Canine Companions and the Proto-Erotics of Youth," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2004): 152.

5 *A Boy and His Dog*, directed by LeRoy Prinz (Warner Bros Pictures, 1946).

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rifice "as a way of (re)forming social subjects that are properly gendered and sexualized,"[6] instead choosing to conclude through the following exchange:

> Blood: Do you know what love is?
> Vic: Sure I know. A boy loves his dog.[7]

The 1946 film *A Boy and His Dog* also celebrates eleven-year-old Davy Allen's bond with the mistreated hound dog Buck, whom he helps liberate from his cruel master Mr. Thornycroft. The boy and his dog are reunited at the end of the short film. However, both Ellison's tale and the Oscar winning short from 1946, while celebrating interspecies bonds with companion animals over intraspecies bonds with other human beings, remain literary exceptions rather than the norm, at least in the fiction of the mid-twentieth century. Diana Schaub notes that the canid's presence educates the boy in manly virtues, and the latter's coming-of-age passage into manhood necessitates the "loss of the dog and a confrontation with mortality."[8] *Old Yeller* (1957) is the prototypical instance of this genre, where the boy is forced to kill the titular dog after the latter is affected with rabies. Interestingly, it is his desire to protect the young boy, Travis Coates, and his family that drives Old Yeller to confront the wolf before the dog is bitten on the neck and turns rabid, which results in Yeller being put down. Old Yeller's role in the film, as well as in Fred Gipson's 1956 novel (on which the film is based) pertains to his role and usefulness in the heteronormative human family structure, acting as the protector in place of the absentee father.

Tribunella locates the potential of such an interspecies relationship to circumvent "some of the potential complexities that impose unwanted limitations on human-human relations."[9] The "exigencies of adult responsibilities"[10] are avoided as are "the conventions and risks of affectively charged relations between people."[11] Furthermore, the complexities of intra-species communication through language are negated through the inarticulateness of the dog, although this also implies that Old Yeller is unable to protest or give assent in clear ways. In fact, despite being depicted as the surrogate paternal protector of the family, the dog is devoid of any agency that any human fulfilling such a role would possess. His sacrifice for the family, while deemed noble by the narrative, is borne of a decision made by the human beings of the family. Old Yeller dies twice. He is literally shot by Travis, the resultant trauma propelling his narrative into

6 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 152.
7 Harlan Ellison, *A Boy and His Dog* (New York: EdgeWorks Abbey, 1969), 75.
8 Diana Schaub, "The Hero in Pop Culture Heroism Goes to the Dogs," The MY HERO Project, 2005, https://myhero.com/heroism_dogs.
9 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 152.
10 Ibid., 153.
11 Ibid.

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adulthood, which is accomplished through "affection for, loss of, and subsequent identification with his dog."[12] As such, the dog becomes a symbol in the story of the boy, and ritual sacrifice enables animals to function as "objects of a melancholic identification."[13] Such an act adheres to what Derrida had referred to as the "noncriminal putting to death"[14] of the non-human animal, a form of symbolic death or ontological erasure of the non-human animal in order to use them as signifiers for human conditions.

The ideas used by Eric Tribunella with regard to his analysis of Old Yeller, and the limited agency of the dog in the boy-and-his-dog literary convention, also hold true when applied to other narratives of the mid-twentieth Century like *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961) and its 1974 film adaptation. Here, the successive deaths of the dogs Old Dan and Little Ann prompt Billy and his family to move to town from their rural home, where Billy could obtain an education. In fact, the very removal of the dogs – who could not have survived in town – becomes necessary for this shift and is financially made possible by the money brought in by the boy and his dogs through their coon hunting. As such, the dogs' presence performs the narrative function of bolstering the family's wealth while their absence enables Billy to come of age. Billy is heartbroken after their demise and mourns his companion animals – such mourning, to borrow the words of Timothy C. Baker, has the potential to "dissolve species boundaries"[15] through the medium of empathy and, consequently, to destabilize the supremacy of the human. In *Where the Red Fern Grows*, this post-anthropocentric counter-gaze is destabilized through the attempts of Billy's father to comfort his son by suggesting that the dogs' deaths were blessings in disguise, as part of a divine sign that Billy must move on to the next phase of his life. Tribunella writes, "the contrived traumatization of children and the transcendence of loss"[16] become essential to the making of (re)productive citizens.

The reciprocal nature of the boy-and-dog relationship is limited by the symbolic use of the dog in anthropogenic narratives. The inarticulateness of the

12 Ibid., 154.

13 Ibid.

14 Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava et. al (New York: Routledge, 1991), 112.

15 Timothy C. Baker, *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 202. To make his argument, Baker builds upon Rosi Braidotti's idea of joyful affirmation (Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions on Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2012), 259) and Simone Weil's idea of grief (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace,* trans. Emma Crawford and Maria von der Ruh (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2002), 32) in creating a new ontology of human/non-human relationships and ways of relating.

16 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 161.

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companion animal, while bringing the human and non-human closer, as discussed by Tribunella, also emphasizes the power differentials. The dog becomes the paradigm of what Anna Barcz calls the mute victim,[17] marginalized because of their linguistic and agentic gap from the human characters, and unable to represent themselves before a human audience.[18] As Tribunella argues, the death that the dog suffers is often symbolic rather than real, as in the case of DiCamillo's Newbery Award-winning novel *Because of Winn Dixie* (2000), where a young girl Opal replaces her attachment figure with the titular dog, and learns to cope with the animal's ultimate departure. Winn Dixie returns but not before her disappearance is used "to teach her [Opal] about reconciling with loss."[19] The narrative uses Winn Dixie to help Opal "navigate her troubled youth in order to attain successful adulthood" but in doing so, prioritizes Winn Dixie's purpose in Opal's story rather than her own non-humanness.[20] Similar ideas are echoed in *Big Red* (1962), where the love for a dog is used as the common bond that brings two good men together, although the dog's agency is afforded more space here. Human agency is again prioritized over non-human agency in *Far from Home: The Adventures of Yellow Dog* (1995), where the protagonist Angus is forced to leave his pet golden retriever to fend for himself because Angus' injuries needed urgent treatment. The story has a happy ending when Yellow returns, but the brief scene beforehand highlights the liminal space of the dog in the heteronormative family structure, where he becomes a man's (or rather boy's) best friend, but is always destined to occupy a secondary role to the human members of the family. The very name of the trope of the boy and "his" dog points to a connotation of pets as property, as living creatures which nonetheless belong to the boy.

17 Anna Barcz, *Animal Narratives and Culture: Vulnerable Realism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 33.

18 The absence of a proper pronoun that offers non-human animals the status of 'being' ("who" as opposed to "what") necessitates the use of "they/their/them" over "it" (a marker of inanimate objects or possessions) while referring to them, despite their singular presence in a sentence. The subconscious anthropocentric nature of language is highlighted by this absence of an adequate pronoun, which has been remarked upon by Gaetenelle Gilquin and George Jacobs (Gaëtanelle Gilquin and George Jacobs, "Elephants Who Marry Mice Are Very Unusual: The Use of the Relative Pronoun Who with Nonhuman Animals," *Society & Animals* 14, no. 1 (2006): 79–105), while other scholars (Jennifer R. Lambdini et al., "The Animal = Male Hypothesis: Children's and Adults' Beliefs About the Sex of Non–Sex-Specific Stuffed Animals," *Springer*, 2003, 471–482) have even analyzed the tendency of attaching masculine pronouns arbitrarily in scenarios where the non-human's gender is not specified.

19 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 163.

20 Ibid., 162.

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Donna Haraway looks at canines as bonded to human beings in "significant otherness,"[21] where they transcend their purpose as surrogates for theory or simple signifiers to think with.[22] However, most instances of twentieth-century literature regard dogs as transformative substances, catalysts for anthropogenic growth and psychological transformation.[23] As such, while the canine companion is mostly relegated to a symbolic role, instances to the contrary do exist; occupying an ambivalent position in such narratives, the dog (often a proxy for various kinds of companion species) is both real and a signifier of attachment, with its relationship to the boy being both egalitarian and hierarchical.[24] The death of a dog and the consequent reaction it brings out is subverted through the stop-motion animated film *Frankenweenie* (2012), where, unable to cope with the loss of his pet dog, the protagonist Victor brings his pet back to life. Sparky's role in the story can be deemed both human and post-human, in that it is only through the humanist agency of the boy that his dog is brought back to life; however, the non-human is not sacrificed (in real or symbolic terms) in order for the human to reach maturity. Instead, the film celebrates the re-animation of the dead who resumes his life as a member of the family at the end of the film. The idea of trauma and loss being necessary stepping stones towards adulthood is also subverted by cleverly merging the boy-and-his-dog narrative with a classic retelling of the 'Frankenstein' story.

Despite agreeing that the stories told about dogs are "never really about dogs at all" but about humans, Erica Fudge locates the mutuality of the interspecies bond in *Lassie Come Home* (1938) and its first film adaptation (1943).[25] The titular canine's presence is regarded as one that signifies the order in the household, while her absence points to disorder.[26] Fudge writes that such stories echo "a desire for completion – for self-knowledge, self-possession, security and stability – but which also have the potential to record – in the dog's death or disappearance – the fragility of such self-knowledge, self-possession, security and stability."[27] This is evident in the family's nostalgic fondness for Lassie:

21 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Malmö, Sweden: MTM, 2020), 3.
22 Matthew Shaw, "Https://Www.bl.uk/Animal-Tales/Articles/Thinking-with-Animals," British Library, November 10, 2015, https://www.bl.uk/animal-tales/articles/thinking-with-animals.
23 Michelle Superle, "Animal Heroes and Transforming Substances: Canine Characters in Contemporary Children's Literature," in *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies,* ed. By Aaron Gross and Anne Vallely (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 174.
24 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 153.
25 Erica Fudge, "The Dog, the Home and the Human, and the Ancestry of Derrida's Cat," *Oxford Literary Review* 29, no. 1–2 (2007): 37.
26 Fudge, "The Dog, the Home and the Human," 37.
27 Ibid.

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> When they had had Lassie, the home had been comfortable and warm and fine and friendly. Now that she was gone nothing went right. So the answer was simple. If Lassie were only back again, then everything once more would be as it used to be.[28]

However, Lassie transcends her merely symbolic function through the protagonist Joe's emphasis on her agency:

> Ye don't understand, Mother. Ye don't understand. It ain't me that wants her. It's her that wants us – so terrible bad. That's what made her come home all that way. She wants us.[29]

Joe's recognition of this agency as opposed to that of the adults of the family posits the capacity of children to empathize with their companion animals in a manner that is often inaccessible to adults in the same narratives. Such a realization "transforms the relationship between the dog and the humans around [Lassie] in that it ensures that we recognize the mutuality of that relationship."[30] Lassie's choice in choosing whom she lives with is re-iterated in the titular character's freedom to choose his owner at the end of *Air Bud* (1997), despite the two narratives being separated by more than half a century.[31] The story follows the journey of a boy struggling with issues in his family as well as his peer group; such a struggle is made easier by the arrival of a golden retriever who has the uncanny ability to play basketball. Air Bud's own escape from his abusive owner to reach his new owner's house and as such, the reciprocal nature of their bonds originates in a recognition of each other's agency.

The children in these stories occupy a liminal space as remarked upon by Amy Ratelle, who posits that "children, like animals, stand outside society, and yet, unlike animals, will ultimately (when they become adults) be responsible for the continuance of that same society."[32] This positioning of child heroes facilitates the process of dissolving interspecies boundaries in order to become one with the

28 Eric Knight, *Lassie-Come-Home* (London, United Kingdom: Penguin, 1981), 63.
29 Ibid., 216.
30 Fudge, "The Dog, the Home and the Human," 40.
31 Justyna Włodarczyk and Julia Wilde look at the manner in which the boy-and-his-dog convention had a lighter beginning, with narratives of the 1930s and 1940s celebrating a happy ending (i. e. *Lassie-Come-Home*), before taking a darker turn during the 1950s, when the climax usually featured the death of the non-human/dog (i. e. Old Yeller and Where the Red Fern Grows). See: Justyna Włodarczyk and Julia Wilde, "Non-Human Kids of Kiddie Lit: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's the Yearling and the Cultural Construction of Animal Narratives as Children's Literature," *Children's Literature in Education*, May 2022, 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-022-09508-6, 6. In its later sections, this paper hopes to analyze how the convention shifts again towards the end of the twentieth as well as the twenty-first century, and speculate how contemporary cultural changes might have led to a greater celebration of non-human agency in narratives.
32 Amy Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5.

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other, in its alterity. Such a process of becoming – even though it prioritizes "canines and other domestic animals over others"[33] – is possible with all kinds of non-human animals. This plethora of different creatures who occupy the role of the dog in various narratives opens up possibilities for exploring other ways of relating to non-human animals. This is made most evident in Zoe Jacques' analysis of the young girl's relationship with the tiger in *The Tiger who Came to Tea:*

> That the tiger never returns is thus both the solution and the problem of the text. In this way the book makes palatable an uncomfortable truth emerging from human-animal studies: current modes of living make it impossible for animals and humans to coexist on any equal or comfortable footing. The use of a "tiger" instead of a domestic cat makes this truth appropriate for exposure to a child audience, perhaps, but it does register a discomfort with the category of pet, even within a relatively straightforward picture-book. Sophie might want to cuddle the tiger, but the tiger cannot cuddle back. Such discomfort… is inherent to pet narratives for children. They must see-saw between ideals of dependence and independence, will to power and subjection, in ways that expose the complexities of species interconnectivity. While the ostensible representation is one of comforting animal-child or human-animal interdependence, these narratives expose the ambiguities found in a posthuman condition where pets are never quite at home.[34]

As such, the boy-and-his-dog narrative in Western (primarily Anglophone) media has been re-adapted to talk about ecological issues, extinction events and species extinctions (for instance, *The Amazing Panda Adventure*, *Abominable*, *Andre*) as well as the horrors of factory farming and meat-eating cultures (*Charlotte's Web*). Amy Ratelle, while analyzing E B White's depiction of Wilbur the pig and his relationship with the farmer's daughter Fern in *Charlotte's Web*, recognizes "the natural sympathy that children are seen as having towards animals."[35] This sympathy makes the stories family-friendly, especially when viewed on screen together, making possible a form of meta-narrative relatability between the kids on screen and the children's audience.

The second part of this paper hopes to undertake a post-anthropocentric reading of three such texts (one original film, one close adaptation of a children's book and the last, a loose adaptation of a book series) in order to gauge a common strain of cross-species empathy among its different protagonists, while also locating how they each adhere to and circumvent conventions of the genre. The convention itself originated in literature or written media, with prominent instances of the genre – *Old Yeller* (1956), *Where the Red Fern grows* (1961),

33 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature*, 64.

34 Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018), 102–3.

35 Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, 103.

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Bristle Face (1962) and *Sounder* (1969) – being adapted for the big screen, respectively in 1957, 1974, 1964 and 1972. Since then, however, the convention has become largely transmedial, encompassing not only written texts and their adaptations but also original films – in fact, an argument might be made in the favour of the fact that the filmic media predominates in terms of portraying the boy-and-his-dog convention as of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, although literary narratives and their adaptations still thrive. The concluding section of this paper also aims to showcase this very fact by glancing at a range of written and visual media to gauge how these texts transmedially reflect a gradual shift in cultural perception towards non-human agency and the ethical dynamics of interspecies bonds. Several of these companion animals perform similar roles to that of the dog, highlighting the potential, paradoxes and limitations of representing the non-human through a human gaze.

The Post-anthropocentric Ontology of *Flora and Ulysses*, *Free Willy* and *How to Train Your Dragon* Trilogy

Eric Tribunella notes that boy-and-his-dog stories are "about coming of age, and a central component of coming of age – except perhaps for some transgender kids – is coming of age as either a man or a woman."[36] The gendered construction of these narratives is evident in Travis Coates' adoption of his role as a "normatively gendered heterosexual man" after his encounters with Old Yeller, such that the narrative becomes a form of indoctrination in heteronormative masculinity. Dreamworks' *How to Train Your Dragon*[37] subverts this function through the character of the central protagonist Hiccup, a young Viking on the fictionalized island of Berk. Hiccup happens to be the current chieftain's son but, despite his position, he is alienated from the other Vikings even on a visual level, by possessing a thin and (seemingly) weak physique, as opposed to his muscular and stockier peers and elders. In his article "Vikings in Cinema: A Case Study of *How to Train your Dragon*," Kobialka criticizes the conventionally hyper-masculine portrayal of Vikings in popular culture, before commenting on Hiccup's deviation from the standard:

> The official ideology of the Vikings in the film is very masculine. A good patriot, an ideal Viking is muscular, strong, fearless and always ready to kill the dragons. Hiccup most

36 Tribunella, "A Boy and His Dog," 153.

37 *How to Train Your Dragon*, directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois (Dreamworks Animation, 2010). This article refers to the 2010 film loosely adapted from Cressida Cowell's children's book series of the same name, and not the book series itself. Furthermore, it refers to the trilogy of films as *How to Train your Dragon* to signify a continuous narrative.

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> definitely is not one of them… Instead of fighting against the enemies, Hiccup tries to understand them.[38]

In fact, killing the non-human animal is a marker of such masculinity and consequently, strength, as is emphasized through one of the very first pieces of exposition by Hiccup:

> Hiccup: A Nadder head is sure to get me at least noticed. Gronckles are tough. Taking down one of those would definitely get me a girlfriend. A Zippleback? Exotic. Two heads. Twice the status. And then there's the Monstrous Nightmare. Only the best Vikings go after those. They have this nasty habit of setting themselves on fire… But the ultimate prize is the dragon no one has ever seen. We call it the…
> Viking: NIGHT FURY! Get down.
> Hiccup: …this thing never steals food, never shows itself, and… never misses. No one has ever killed a Night Fury. That's why I'm going to be the first.[39]

Hiccup's failure to live up to the conventional standards of Berk's Viking society is associated with his lack of conventional masculinity, as well as his potential inability to slay a dragon. When, however, he does shoot down a dragon from a distance – a Night Fury, no less – he does not have the heart to kill the dragon but, over the course of time, befriends him and names him Toothless. While training with his fellow Vikings, Hiccup secretly takes care of Toothless, and his close proximity with the latter lets him gain insights into the lives of dragons in a way that his peers are unable to, thereby letting him surpass them during their routine dragon-slaying lessons – only, he does not use violence to drive the dragons into submission but other means. Toothless soon becomes the 'dog' to Hiccup's 'boy', and, even though unintentionally, the dragon's presence in the pre-adolescent Viking's life enables the latter to not only fit in among his fellow Vikings but over the course of three films, emerge to be their leader.

Several of Hiccup's close friends and family members remain initially resistant to the idea of a human being befriending a dragon and even try to separate them – Hiccup's love interest Astrid attempts to reveal his secret, while his father Stoick captures the Night Fury – before they are convinced otherwise, often by the combined agency of the boy and his dragon that manages to accomplish feats that neither human (Viking) nor non-human (dragon) could do on their own. It is Toothless' presence in Hiccup's life, his consequent achievements and resulting self-confidence that enable him to gain his father's respect. The Viking/dragon harmony that was ushered in by Toothless' presence even enables Hiccup to reunite with his mother Valka in *How to Train Your Dragon II*, where it is

38 Dawid Kobiałka, "Vikings in Cinema: A Case Study of *How to Train Your Dragon*," *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 7, no. 4 (2013): 10.

39 *How to Train Your Dragon*, directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois (Dreamworks Animation, 2010).

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revealed that Berk's anti-dragon attitudes under Stoick's rule had initially alienated her. This gradual sense of understanding between humans and non-humans not only transforms the island of Berk into a contact zone of multi-species harmony, where every Viking has a dragon companion (effectively re-iterating the child/animal bond on a macrocosmic level), but also distinguishes the protagonists of Berk from the invading antagonists, who intend to use the dragons for nefarious purposes.

Foremost among them are Drago Bludvist in *How to Train Your Dragon II*, a warmongering barbarian who attempts to trap dragons and forcibly use them as weapons of mass destruction through hypnotic means, and Grimmel the Grisly in *How to Train Your Dragon III: The Hidden World*, a trophy hunter single handedly responsible for having driven Night Furies into near-extinction. Toothless and Hiccup defeat both antagonists and manage to save the dragons and the villagers of Berk as their respective leaders. However, Hiccup realizes the danger that other human beings like Grimmel, or even humanity as a species, might pose to his non-human companion, and they decide to part ways. Even if such a decision ends the film on a slightly misanthropic note, thereby partially negating the work done towards establishing multispecies harmony, the nature of the conflict in the final film is strongly ecological, with Grimmel's antagonism and subsequent defeat condemning the real-world actions of big-game and trophy hunters – the fictional dragons' retreat from the known world and the fracture of the child/animal bond transforms into a form of meta-narrative mourning for declining biodiversity.

Hiccup's prioritization of Toothless' needs over his friendship highlights the inherent selflessness underlying the child/animal bond in the film trilogy. Toothless is never depicted as a prop to simply aid in Hiccup's coming-of-age narrative. Rather, his friendship with Hiccup and the latter's presence in his life catalyzes his own non-human bildungsroman. Just as his friendship with Toothless leads Hiccup to become the chieftain over a series of events, the young Viking, too, assists Toothless in defeating larger dragons and consequently emerges as the "alpha" (leader) of all dragon kind. Hiccup and Astrid's relationship begins only when the latter comes to respect him and his perspective after flying behind him on Toothless' back; similarly, Hiccup helps Toothless in finding a mate and even (in several comic scenes) helps him woo her. The trilogy ends with an epilogue after several years have passed, showing Hiccup and Toothless reuniting for a few moments when they introduce their children to each other.

The journeys of Hiccup and Toothless parallel each other, with both gaining strength from the child/non-human bond, and never is Toothless used as a simple storytelling device for Hiccup's development. *How to Train your Dragon* and its sequels bring to mind the interspecies dynamic in Disney's *Flora and Ulysses*,

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derived from Kate DiCamillo's novel of the same name.[40] The story echoes many narrative elements from DiCamillo's other girl/non-human bonding story but goes further in depicting non-human agency. Unlike Winn-Dixie's bond with Opal, "the title characters are given equal weight, the squirrel is only in service to the human as much as the human is in service to the squirrel, and there is no clear hierarchy."[41]

Ulysses gains his powers through an accident, which lends him higher degrees of strength and intelligence. His first poem typed on a typewriter, consisting of an assortment of things that he likes, becomes a brilliant expression of love for the young girl Flora Buckman. Despite his ontological non-humanness, Ulysses is in many ways raised to the level of a human, starting from his very name. Like his Greek namesake, he is depicted as a heroic figure. He is even able to create poetry – a form of expression and literacy that is deemed exclusive to human beings. Ulysses, despite not being a speaking squirrel, is able to use his writing to transcend the non-human's inherent linguistic gap from human beings which often impedes them from articulating their affective states or representing their desires before an anthropogenic audience. As such, his increased cognitive and understanding skills, superhero persona and ability to communicate – all three characteristics typically deemed to be possessed by humans and humans only, to be then used as pretext for anthropo-denial – enable him to transcend his species limitations as well as the human/animal divide. This act of writing brings out Ulysses' similarity to another non-human protagonist of a children's book, Lyle, a singing saltwater crocodile that debuted in Bernard Waber's *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile* (1965)[42] and its 2022 film adaptation.[43] Lyle, like Ulysses, is incapable of regular speech but can articulate himself through singing in the human language – both writing and singing become modes of anthropogenic communication that the non-human uses to transcend their communicative limitations, and which affords them agency in their respective narratives. However, despite being a story written much earlier, Lyle's actions differ from those of Ulysses in their intentionality; in other words, the former consciously attempts to help his boy Josh Primm's family members bond with each other, while also helping each of them to come to terms with their inner desires. Furthermore, the 2022 adaptation portrays Lyle as walking bipedally and uses his face to make uncannily humanized expressions – effectively rendering him in a liminal, anthropomorphic space between saltwater crocodile and *Homo sapiens*. In contrast, Timothy C. Baker remarks on Ulysses' role in the story:

40 *Flora and Ulysses*, directed by Lena Khan. (Walt Disney Pictures. 2021).
41 Baker, *Writing Animals*, 202.
42 Bernard Waber, *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile* (New York, USA, NY: HarperCollins, 2022).
43 *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile*, directed by Will Speck and Josh Gordon. (Columbia Pictures, 2022).

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> Ulysses is resolutely marked as a squirrel, who has his own desires and emotions; although his adventures do lead to the creation of a more harmonious community, this is far more incidental than in Winn-Dixie. Instead, the novel focuses on the ability of poetry to express love.[44]

When Flora resuscitates Ulysses in a humorous scene, she utters the words:

> If you're wondering how a squirrel's mouth tastes, it's exactly how you'd think. Fuzzy, damp and slightly nutty. But Incandesto fights for the weak, no matter how they taste.

She temporarily adopts the persona of her father's superhero creation Incandesto that saves the "weak" and nearly dying Ulysses, whereas over the course of the story, Ulysses himself becomes the superhero. Both girl and squirrel become superheroes in each other's lives, not only reaffirming the power of the interspecies bond but also imaginatively transcending the marginalized stature and powerlessness of children and non-humans in an anthropocentric society. Furthermore, Flora's interactions with the world around her and Ulysses' ability to write meta-textually highlight the relevance of telling stories.[45] Flora, struggling through her parents' divorce, attempts to escape from the troubles plaguing her in the real world and recedes into the world of superheroes. Incandesto lends Flora hope even though, as a self-proclaimed cynic, she betrays knowledge that superheroes are not real… that however different they are, "all superheroes come to us with a purpose – to save those in need. To stand watch when danger comes in. They have one thing in common, they never show up in the real world."

Flora's self-proclaimed cynicism is linked with her sense of reality and self-aware attempts to grow up, to transcend a form of childishness that she associates with imaginary worlds and fictional superheroes. However, the narrative subverts this in two ways – firstly, by celebrating the desire of her greatest ally, her father, to draw and earn a living by drawing fantastic worlds and superhumans. Secondly, the story subverts the traditional coming-of-age narrative featuring the boy and his dog, where the protagonist has to face a harsh state of reality and make tough choices in order to become an adult (exemplified by Old Yeller and, to a degree, by *Where the Red Fern Grows*). Instead, Flora's encounter with Ulysses, her subsequent escapades and her experiences in life do enable her to mature, but such maturity is borne of a sense of hopefulness rather than cynicism or loss even though there is a parting of ways.

It is here that Ulysses becomes a hero, not because of his superhuman feats but for a very ordinary reason – uniting the Buckman family and providing Flora

44 Baker, *Writing AnImals*, 202–3.

45 The act of telling stories – a.k.a., writing, communicating, narrating, imagining and understanding – themselves become important markers of human culture but here, a squirrel can use a typewriter too, thereby adding another layer to the deconstruction of anthropocentrism.

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with a companion animal she can rely on for emotional support. The squirrel's role in making this union possible is incidental and occurs when both of Flora's parents come together to aid her in retrieving Ulysses from the local animal control officer, who had taken him to the pound for euthanization. After a series of (mis)adventures, the family determines that the best place for a squirrel is the woods, away from the town, where he is released. Here, like in *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*, the child is still separated from the non-human animal, but the separation occurs for the sake of what is best for the latter. Flora understands Ulysses' needs and prioritizes them over her own desire for companionship – on the other hand, understanding is deemed to be the squirrel's greatest superpower. The success of Ulysses' poem for Flora lay in how it encapsulated "an understanding, and love, of the entire world."[46] Such understanding has the potential to bridge species boundaries and becomes truly mutual and reciprocal through its bi-directional nature.

Ulysses becomes a true companion animal, an equal to Flora, as opposed to a pet praised for his subservience – and both DiCamillo's novel and its film adaptation highlight his agency through his antics, chaotic encounters, ability to write poetry, capacity for understanding and empathy and, most of all, his non-human Otherness. *Flora and Ulysses* celebrates the meta-textual power of storytelling, but ironically, it is perhaps limited by its lack of potential to "illuminate the lives of real squirrels, nor encourage ethical engagement in any direct way."[47] Such a limitation is transcended by the narrative of *Free Willy*[48] and the ethical debates surrounding the real orca whale, Keiko, which enacted the role of the titular character.[49] The fictionalized story of an orca escaping to the sea with the help of a rebellious boy touched the hearts of people beyond the screen, who advocated for the freedom of the actual whale who played the role of Willy. The diegetic journey of Willy and the extra-diegetic liberation of Keiko not only highlighted the potential of fictional human/non-human bonds to influence how real interspecies relationships are perceived, serving to embed Keiko and Willy in "discourses about the ethics of captivity and performance as the latest chapter in a long history of the exploitation of whales as a natural resource."[50]

46 Baker, *Writing Animals*, 203.
47 Ibid., 204.
48 *Free Willy*, directed by Simon Wincer (Warner Bros. Picture: 1993).
49 A reason why *Free Willy* provides a realistic depiction of non-human animals, unlike *Flora & Ulysses*, is because of the realistic nature of this movie. Meanwhile, *Flora and Ulysses* uses elements of the fantastic and even straddles the line between fantasy and science fiction, and hence does not accurately portray the behaviour of squirrels. The concluding section of this chapter negotiates this very divide between realism and fantasy, and the manner in which the portrayal of interspecies bonds is affected because of this.
50 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, 118.

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Both 'the boy' Jesse and 'his dog' Willy are rebels who are separated from their families in different ways. Captured and brought to a marine theme park, Willy is separated from his family and forced to perform against his will. The orphan Jesse lives with his newly-adoptive family, but is unwilling to connect with them, choosing instead to engage in delinquent practices. The orca whale, named Willy, is regarded as surly and uncooperative but responds well to the tune Jesse plays on his harmonica. Over a series of events, the bond between the two deepens, and subsequently, Jesse is not only offered a permanent job at the theme park but also warms up to his new home over the course of time. However, Jesse comes to know of an attempt to kill Willy, with the aim of cashing in on his insurance money. Jesse and his foster parents, attempt to return Willy back to his natural habitat after hearing the call of his pod while fighting his assailants along the way. While Jesse is instrumental in helping Willy reach his family, Willy provides Jesse with a source of silent companionship, is able to help the boy free himself from his own internal demons, move past his delinquent tendencies and finally settle into a loving home. In several ways, the characters are deemed equal in their contributions toward helping the other reunite with his family.

However, while Jesse sees his foster parents as his captors, Willy is actually captive and held against his will: the commonalities between human and non-human characters are both highlighted and undermined throughout the narrative. Furthermore, while the bonds between the "human trainer and animal performer can become close, cetacean consent can arguably never be granted, since the animals are being held against their will."[51] In one disastrous attempt to put on a show as part of his new job, Jesse is unable to control Willy's actions, so that the latter becomes agitated and smashes a hole in his glass container. The narrative shifts between the perspectives of both human child and non-human animal to generate the audience's sympathy towards the orca, which, at this moment, is not shared by Jesse. Jesse sees Willy's rebelliousness as a personal breach of trust, succumbing to "the fantasy of species border crossing."[52] This gap of empathy between the characters is soon rectified – however, as the human/non-human bond is (re)established, the narrative forces the whale to control his rebelliousness and adhere to the commands of the human boy, even if the human boy is one whom the orca chose to befriend.[53] The agency of the non-human is both celebrated and limited by the fact that the human trainer has to consent to such a performance of the agency, mirroring several real-world debates about the

51 Ibid., 128.

52 Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 265.

53 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, 131.

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granting of legal personhood to non-humans that D'Amato and Chopra highlight:

> …there is nothing strange about recognizing the rights of whales – creatures that are more animate than corporations, more communicative than infants and mentally enfeebled persons, more communal than the society of nations, and perhaps more intelligent than the smartest human beings.[54]

The court granting the rights is undoubtedly an organization composed of humans, and as such, upholds human beings (or human adults) to be the ultimate voices on the non-human's destiny. In this narrative, such a lack of agency is further emphasized through the use of "a captive orca to present an anti-captivity narrative."[55] Both are rebels, and Jesse's bonds with Willy are strengthened by the recognition of the latter's individuality instead of simply regarding him as a whale "species":

> Rae: You like whales?
> Jesse: I like him.
> Rae: Well, he doesn't like anybody. So you be careful around him. You see, Willy's a case. A very special case.
> Jesse: So? Who isn't?[56]

They become outcasts from human society, not only by virtue of their defiance of norms or refusal to conform but because of their species-identity (Willy) and status as a child (Jesse). As such, the success of narratives of the child/non-human bonding lies in the conflation of childhood and non-humanness, where both constructed states of being are "separate from and subordinate to adulthood… predicated on maintaining the illusion of a clear boundary."[57] The presence of the various sequels where Jesse keeps re-encountering Willy subverts the trope of melancholic separation with the non-human companion that occurs at the threshold of adulthood. Both Willy and Jesse grow older, but their friendship remains intact even till the final film of the trilogy – with both human and non-human families being witnesses to and supporters of such friendship.

All three of the aforementioned protagonists – Jesse, Flora and Hiccup – struggle with maintaining interpersonal human connections, a process that is aided by the intrusion of non-human animals (Willy, Ulysses and Toothless) into their lives. While Ulysses and Toothless are demonstrated to possess a greater

54 Anthony D'Amato and Sudhir K. Chopra, "Whales: Their Emerging Right to Life," *International Legal Personality*, May 2017, 393–434, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315092485-17, 423.
55 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, 129.
56 Here, Jesse's use of the pronoun "who" while referring to a non-human animal, and using it to relate to himself lends Willy personhood, bringing to mind the linguistic debates regarding the depictions of non-human animals.
57 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, 4.

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degree of agency than Willy, all three narratives showcase a form of selflessness on the part of the human character, whose desire to aid his/her non-human friend originates from the narrative's recognition of the non-human creature as a being-in-itself rather than a signifier for the human character's coming-of-age story. Furthermore, all three stories feature two kinds of adult humans – those who help the children on their quest, and the antagonists, who desire to use the characters for their own motives. The former comprises the family members or friends whose shared experiences with the children bring them closer, and who learn to adopt a post-anthropocentric point of view.

Conclusion: Envisioning a Post-humanist Future

Brendan Sheridan regards dragon-riding as an act of power and control over the non-human, and Hiccup, by riding Toothless into spaces far beyond the reach of other children of his age, exercises this power.[58] However, such an exercise of power is hardly anthropocentric; it is only through the dragon's consent that he is able to ride him, and it is his friendship with the seemingly-monstrous Other that affords him a sense of agency and power. This is true not only for other narratives using fantastic creatures as companion animals but also for the other two narratives discussed above. While not technically monsters, the squirrel with superpowers and the rebellious orca whale defy anthropocentric norms and orders simply by their existence and/or actions.

While the existence of Ulysses and Toothless is hidden from most (if not all) adult humans in the initial stages, Willy is put on display – however, despite the host of audience members watching him, he only allows Jesse access to his mental and affective states. As such, the human/non-human bonds are sustained by exclusivity, where only the child protagonist is able to (and often allowed to) understand, empathize with and help the companion animal. Over time, the children are joined by their family members who helped them oppose the antagonists. The antagonists in all three films take the form of what Derrida called the ideal man in Western epistemology – an adult male individual who eats flesh and accepts the sacrifice inherent to it.[59] The villains of *Flora and Ulysses*, *Free Willy* and the *How to Train your Dragon* trilogy do not explicitly engage their desires to consume the non-human's flesh, but their desire to eliminate or use them for their own nefarious aims re-enacts the Judeo-Christian myth of "God's

58 Brendan Sheridan, "Dragon-Riding: Live and Let Fly," *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* 3, no. 3 (2016): 19–30.

59 Derrida, "'Eating Well," 114.

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granting dominion to man over animals."[60] As such, the humanist subject is opposed and has his plans thwarted by the post-human assemblage of non-humans, human children and their family members.

Such narratives afford the protagonists (and through meta-narrative identification, the children beyond the screen) a fantasy of power in an adult-oriented society where they are denied agency. The liminal space occupied by children as future inheritors of this society enables them to become temporary deviants from said society.[61] Furthermore, their troubled mental states allow them to connect with non-humans more readily than with members of their own species. This reflects real-world instances on interspecies bonding, as exemplified by the several interviews undertaken by Helen Louise Brooks where dogs, cats, birds, rabbits and other non-human creatures offer a reciprocal, non-judgmental and understanding counter-gaze to people suffering from autism, ADHD, trauma, anxiety and depression.[62] The depictions of such cross-species relationships on screen, however, have been historically deemed to reduce the non-human animal to an object to think with – a dynamic that has changed, in part, by an increased emphasis on the agency of the non-human animal in the boy-and-his-dog convention.

This is evident when looking at the narratives emerging towards the later part of the twentieth century and twenty-first century. While deaths of companion animals in service to their human partners are present in texts as new as *Stone Fox* (1980) and its 1987 movie adaptation, mid-twentieth-century films like *Born Free* (1966) and *Charlie the Lonesome Cougar* (1967) envision non-human liberation from anthropocentric selflessness in ways very similar to *Free Willy*. However, these instances and their diminished number remain exceptions rather than the norm – a norm that manifests in a shifting depiction of child/non-human bonding that corresponds with, and might even be deemed a cultural by-product of, changing perceptions towards animal welfare and an increased emphasis on non-human rights during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The three films discussed in detail serve as prototypical instances to showcase this changing trend and its transmedial nature,[63] the varying degrees of realism

60 Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, 78.

61 Ibid., 5.

62 Helen Louise Brooks et al., "The Power of Support from Companion Animals for People Living with Mental Health Problems: A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis of the Evidence," *BMC Psychiatry* 18, no. 1 (May 2018), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2.

63 *Free Willy* is an original film, *Flora and Ulysses* is a close adaptation of a children's book and *How to train your Dragon* loosely borrows elements from Cressida Cowell's book series of the same name.

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and fantasy,[64] the scale of interspecies conflict envisioned,[65] and different attempts to depict non-human agency on-screen, while also highlighting (intentionally or through slippage) the limitations of such attempts. For instance, Willy and Toothless lack Ulysses' agency in their inability to communicate through a human language, even if partially so, while Willy's agency is even further limited by his imprisonment – on the other hand, the realistic nature of Willy's story and its real-world implications through Keiko have demonstrated a greater impact on audiences than the fantastic adventures of a dragon or a flying squirrel. Toothless' ability to fly and breathe fire establishes him as a potential threat to Viking society, affording him agency and an ability to traverse vast distances – on the other hand, these abilities also cause dragon trappers and big-game hunters as a trophy to be captured, controlled and/or slain. In realistic stories like *Cheetah*, *Free Willy* or *The Flight of the Gray Wolf*, a similar form of non-human powerlessness as that of Willy is manifested, while yet others like *My Pet Dinosaur*, *How to Train Your Dragon* or *Abominable*, due to fantastic or speculative story elements, enable the non-human animals to showcase a larger degree of agency that is unable to be constrained by contemporary human knowledge and designs. As such, the use of realism vastly limits the storyteller's possibilities in portraying non-human agency, which meta-narratively highlights the lack of agentic capacity and powerlessness of non-human animals in the real, anthropogenically dominated world.

Even in recent media, most of the narratives featuring the boy and his animal companion (barring a few like *Shiloh, Monkey Trouble* and *Racing Stripes*) restore balance through the permanent or temporary expulsion of the non-human animal from the family structure, to trace a divisive line between nature and culture, even if the same is done with the pretext that the family does what is best for the non-human. Such expulsion leads to the restoration of a heteronormative family structure, with little to no room for queerness. Furthermore, the vast plethora of non-human species and types depicted on screen encourage conservationist tendencies by portraying non-humans and their human benefactors as heroes, while painting their oppressors in a villainous light. Such representation, despite its pedagogical relevance for young viewers, is still, to a degree, implicitly speciesist – most companion animals depicted are mammals or mammalian analogues, with a few other forms of vertebrates, and virtually no invertebrates. As such, while encouraging biophilic tendencies, the films im-

64 Willy's story lacks any speculative elements and he is a regular orca, and Ulysses is a squirrel but with superpowers. Contrarily, Toothless is a mythical creature that lives in a fictional locale and different time period.

65 The conflict in *Flora and Ulysses* occurs in a small town, while in *Free Willy* it traverses a larger area and even the waters beyond the coast; in *How to train your Dragon* and its sequels, this envelops entire islands and archipelagos and impacts distant corners of the world.

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plicitly do so for certain groups of creatures while excluding others from their purview.[66]

The aforementioned criticisms, however, do not negate the changing trend in the depiction of cross-species bonding that these films envision. Disney itself has come a long way from its representation of Old Yeller as a symbol for generating sorrow narratively and meta-narratively, to that of the chaotic squirrel Ulysses. This changing trend also reflects in the changing status of pets to companion animals, which is being manifested linguistically as time goes on. Furthermore, several such narratives, like that of Willy and his real-world counterpart Keiko have demonstrated the potential of the portrayed non-humans on the screen to change the fate of real non-human characters. Despite their inability to type out a response to review their depictions, as perhaps Ulysses might have, these non-powered species have the ability to hold a counter-gaze to anthropogenic activities. The creation of sustainable narratives which promote sustainable narratives becomes important, especially from a pedagogical perspective regarding younger viewers. As such, the future of the child/non-human bond can be summarised in this quote by Flora about Ulysses, which links their fates together as shared spots of grief and resistance: "There was nobody who could save him. And nobody who could save us" – in the end, they manage to be there for each other.

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66 Edward O. Wilson and David Quammen, *Biophilia* (NY, New York: The Library of America, 2021).

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Concepción Cortés Zulueta (Universidad de Málaga)

Is that a car alarm? Or a bird? Representing and thinking birds' mimicry as a co-constituted living archive

Abstract
Across Europe, everyday species like blackbirds and starlings are accomplished imitators. They put into practice their non-human, avian agencies to select aural bits of the surrounding soundscape and reproduce these fragments in their songs, creating a resounding portrait of their hybrid habitats, mixing and stirring human and non-human sounds: alarms, smartphones, or engines, as well as the songs and calls of other birds or animals like cats and frogs. We can represent and think of these avian mimics as living, co-constituted archives. Through their agencies and preferences, they select, store, perform and sing these imitations, shaping a more-than-human representation that tells sonic stories of their surroundings.
Keywords: living archives, *Turdus merula*, *Sturnus unicolor*, mimicry, avian agencies

The concepts of archive, power and agency have been widely discussed across several fields, together with the implications of their intertwinings.[1] Despite its customary claims towards objectivity, the most conventional, extended and institutional manifestations of the archive are expressions of the power of the state (or empire) or of a certain status quo that both the building or location where all those items are kept and its contents embody.[2] In these manifestations, those with power exert and impose their agencies in order to decide, first, which materials are worthy of being archived and preserved, and second, how the

1 Well-known references on archives and power include Derrida and Foucault, among others: Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: Une Impression Freudienne*, Incises (Paris: Galilée, 1995); Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). I would like to warmly thank Garazi Ansa, who has worked extensively on archives and contemporary art, for an exchange that clarified my ideas: Garazi Ansa Arbelaiz, *Gorputzetik Gorputzera. Artxiboak Erakusketa Aretoetan* (Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, 2020).

2 Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 171–85, Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 19–26; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London; New York: Verso, 1993).

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selected materials are categorised and sorted.[3] In this manner, a distinct—and often denied or minimised—subjectivity is put into practice. This is a subjectivity that, through its biases, chooses to include some things and to exclude others and that, by the way in which it orders, classifies and labels the archival contents, exposes how those with power hierarchise and differentially value the records and remains of those included in the archive, as well as their agencies. In studying the classification of archival contents, one can examine whether these agencies are denied or recognised, and to what extent.

The archive, then, becomes continually performed by archivists and by its users in processes through which collective memory, identity, history and stories, are produced and assessed and through which the past is controlled and shaped, influencing the outcomes of these developments.[4] Some agencies are prioritised over others, either because they are showcased or forgotten in the materials themselves or in how those materials are presented or because they are included or excluded from participating in the process or are considered or not considered as part of that process.

In line with this thinking, and among other forms of prioritization, the agencies of non-human animals are often denied, excluded, minimised or neglected in this way in the site, context and concept of the archive.[5] This conditions how other-than-human animals are envisaged, addressed or contemplated, and so a relevant concern, in this sense, is to bear in mind non-human animals' agencies regarding archives, including their presences and absences and both their tangible and conceptual traces. The above can, of course, not only be applied to the archive, or to archives, as institutions and specific collections of materials conceived and defined in a strict sense[6] but also to more unconventional archives and to a notion of the archive understood in a broader, looser sense. For instance, it may apply to those selections and compilations of virtual materials endorsed by digital humanities[7] or to the archives so prominently and widely debated in contemporary art and in contemporary art history with regard to definite artworks or as the leitmotiv behind some artworks and exhibitions, among others.[8]

3 Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive", 19–20.

4 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 1–19.

5 Zeb Tortorici, "Animal Archive Stories: Species Anxieties in the Mexican National Archive," in *The Historical Animal*, ed. Susan Nance (Syracuse University Press Syracuse NY, 2015), 75–98. Tortorici also notes that animals such as insects can be encountered in archives through the traces they leave in the paper and materials they consume.

6 See, for example, the discussion on the definiton of archive in: Kate Theimer, "Archives in Context and as Context," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012): 1–2.

7 Ibid.

8 Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

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However, in this chapter I will approach the topic of non-human animals, agency and archives in another way. Through highlighting the vocal mimicry of birds like common blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) and spotless starlings (*Sturdus unicolor*), I will attempt to reflect on them and propose that they are living archives. This implies shifting the focus away from archives that are generated, compiled and organised by humans, within which remains or traces pertaining or referring to non-human animals may or may not be acknowledged. Instead, this approach offers the possibility of non-human animal archives, of archives other-than-human, or even of more-than-human archives. In particular, it considers these birds as both archives and archivists since they listen to, select, remember, practice, sing, and repeat sounds extracted from their surrounding soundscapes. In this process, they exercise their agencies and subjectivities, choosing some of the sounds over others, placing them in specific spots of their song structures, insisting on their favourites, then changing or dropping others as the years go by.

Since these birds' mimicries do include anthropogenic sounds, it can be argued that they are also archiving humans, together with other elements taken from the soundscapes they know and in which they live, whose sonic fragments they combine in their songs. Given that plenty of these mimicries are recognisable as such by human ears (and subjectivities, because we are either fooled by them or we associate them with the original sound and source), we are able to listen to ourselves as sung and represented by these birds' agencies and subjectivities. In this respect, it is as if they were turning the tables on us—as if positions had been temporarily exchanged and we now were at the other side of the line, being archived and represented as others instead of doing so ourselves. This could affect or help us to reassess how we think about archives, especially those who hold and preserve collections of animal sounds, like the online platform xeno-canto, Cornell's Macaulay Library, or FonoZoo at the MNCN.[9] It also sheds light on the imbrications of agency, power and mimicry, particularly when humans are the ones being deceived by avian imitations and not the other way around.

Birds as living archives

In fact, my scholarly interest in birds, and in their songs, was stirred when I realised that I had been fooled by a bird. For several days, I was deceived into thinking that I was listening to a certain species when, actually, it happened to be an individual of another, imitating the song of the former. A while later, and as was experienced by a significant amount of people around the globe, the pan-

9 See: https://xeno-canto.org/, https://www.macaulaylibrary.org/ and http://www.fonozoo.com/.

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demic lockdown's sounds and silences fixed my attention on bird songs and calls and on their avian comings and goings, which led me to consider those songs as history in themselves.[10]

Simultaneously, I began to wonder whether the birds I could hear mimicking other avian species, other animals, or human sounds, could be thought of and represented as unconventional, living archives in the broad sense of the term. The notion of the living archive has been used and discussed in several ways and with different nuances and is generally associated with oral history or performance studies. It is often applied to people (or bodies) with a wealth of preserved and perhaps undervalued knowledge of a kind that may be at risk of being lost or that escapes what is stored in a conventional, institutional archive, understood in a narrow sense. All such discussion of living archives emphasise transmission and the intersubjectivities that come with it.[11] In these contexts, either the people themselves or their embodied knowledges would be characterised as those living archives. Without being initially aware of these precedents, I thought of the concept of living archives as contrasting with conventional human archives; this contrast was pointed out and underscored by the liveliness and aural presences of the singing birds. Nevertheless, the aim here is to examine these avian living archives from the realisation and through a consideration of their mimicries. In a way, these imitations display a mirror that returns another image of us; this image has corresponding implications with regard to archives, agencies and subjectivities: it inverts the terms, hinting to a potential switching or swapping of positions. Humans self-appoint themselves as in charge of archiving, but here we are being archived, mixed among other beings and things. Moreover, those who are archiving us are the ones whose agencies and subjectivities we often misrepresent or even forget about.

After all, the birds whose mimicries I am going to address register, remember and perform, within their songs, sounds that they take from their aural environment, including some of human origin. They listen and pay attention to the surrounding soundscape; they select some sonic excerpts and learn them, remembering and absorbing those sounds inwards, storing them inside their brains, and then, outwards, they perform a range of the sounds as part of their

10 Concepción Cortés Zulueta, "Sobre La Historia de Los Cantos de Las Aves o Los Cantos de Las Aves Como Historia," *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 28, no. suppl 1 (December 2021): 17–35. See also: Concepción Cortés Zulueta, "Silent Spring, Resounding Spring: The Fleeting and Changing Sonic Absence and Presence of Thrushes and Nightingales across Two Dystopian Moments," in *Beyond the Human Voice: Dystopian Soundscapes in the Arts*, ed. Susanne Rode-Breymann and Martin Ullrich (In Press).

11 See, for instance: Amalia G. Sabiescu, "Living Archives and The Social Transmission of Memory," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 497–510; Columbia University, *Luisa Passerini: Living Archives | Continuity and Innovation in the Art of Memory*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuZkHC7TcKQ.

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songs. These sounds are performed in different and varying iterations, combinations, and positions within the structures of those songs and in sung dialogues with other birds. Thus, they express their agencies through the whole process, and also frame and contextualise each of the sounds in different, subjective ways.

Elsewhere, I have explored the option of a signed testimony by a nonhuman animal as a historical source.[12] Departing from those earlier efforts, and as I mentioned before, this recent avenue of research started when I began to think about bird songs as history in themselves.[13] From here, an important first step is to pause and take the time to ponder about the birds that issue and sing that history, drawing from their listenings and their choices, from their learning and remembering, from their practicing, their combinations and compositions, and to wonder about them as living archives. The aural expressions of other animals can offer and open up new possibilities to rethink agency, archives, or power relationships, which will be addressed hereafter. However, in order to do this, and to take into account the conceivable implications, it is necessary to examine vocal mimicry as it presents in certain bird species. Even, in individual birds or in particular groups of birds living and singing in specific, situated contexts, percolated by their own, corresponding soundscapes.

Vocal mimicry in birds: common blackbirds and spotless starlings

A commonly encountered preconception on vocal mimicry in wild birds is that it is a rare occurrence, characteristic of some birds perceived as exotic and living far away, maybe heard once in a while in a wildlife film.[14] During a series of aural workshops, we requested students to listen to an collection of several recordings of varied imitations by a blackbird, disclosing very limited information regarding the recordings themselves so we could learn about the students' reactions. They were mostly shocked and surprised, incredulous that a bird they took for granted and that they were used to seeing so often, also within and around campus, possessed an impressive vocal range and flexibility and was capable of such

12 Concepción Cortés Zulueta, "Nonhuman Animal Testimonies: A Natural History in the First Person?," in *The Historical Animal*, ed. Susan Nance (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 118–30.

13 Ibid.

14 A recurring reference and filmic excerpt that keeps arising during conversations on avian vocal mimicry is the lyrebird featured in a BBC/David Attenborough wildlife film mimicking camera shutters and chainsaws, who then became the star of a Greenpeace advertisement denouncing massive logging and also of a viral, re-edited video-meme, showing a baffled Attenborough continually interrupted and confounded by the bird's imitations: BBC Studios, *Amazing! Bird Sounds From The Lyre Bird—David Attenborough—BBC Wildlife*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjE0Kdfos4Y.

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virtuosity. Moreover, a percentage of them had been fooled, believing that they were listening to noises of human origin (alarms, engines, brake screeching) or to other species of birds, such as a rooster or a seagull, instead of listening to mimicries performed by a blackbird.[15]

However, contrary to the students' preconceptions, avian vocal mimicry is quite widespread among European birds—European passerines specifically—with many reported to be able to mimic several species.[16] Nonetheless, and despite this large number of mimicking and mimicked avian species, there are still plenty of unknowns regarding this phenomenon, its proper definition, and its causes and functions.[17] It is also important to take into account the fact that imitation is how the birds who don't inherit their songs—that is, birds whose songs are not genetically codified and transmitted in this manner—learn them from other tutor birds, usually from their same species.[18] But sometimes these tutor birds are from other species, or the birds just replicate the sounds of other animals—humans included—or from the environment. Generally, and due to their ubiquity, it is not necessary to look very far to find birds that mimic other species, or other sounds, and as it is a relatively widespread phenomenon, its resulting implications may also be significant.

Here, I will focus on common blackbirds (*Turdus merula*, or *mirlos*, in Spanish) and on starlings, specifically, spotless starlings (*Sturnus unicolor*, or *estorninos negros*, black starlings, in Spanish), both of whom are fairly good imitators.[19] I chose these two species—or perhaps, in a metaphorical way, they

15 Amaia Salazar and I organised a series of three aural workshops in September 2021, with the three different groups of the course '*Teorías del Arte Contemporáneo*' (Contemporary Art Theories) at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Universidad Complutense, Madrid. I would like to thank the students who participated in the workshops and willingly provided their feedback, and also Amaia Salazar and Professor Tonia Raquejo, who made possible my stay at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

16 According to the supplementary data accompanying Garamszegi et al., heterospecific vocal mimicry has been observed in around 40% of European passerines, and at least over 20 species have been reported to mimic 10 or more species: László Zsolt Garamszegi et al., "A Comparative Study of the Function of Heterospecific Vocal Mimicry in European Passerines," *Behavioral Ecology* 18, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 1001–9.

17 Anastasia H. Dalziell et al., "Avian Vocal Mimicry: A Unified Conceptual Framework," *Biological Reviews* 90, no. 2 (2015): 643–68.

18 Henrike Hultsch and Dietmar Todt, "Learning to Sing," in *Nature's Music* (Elsevier, 2004), 80–107; Donald Kroodsma, *The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong* (Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015). I would like to thank Cristian Pérez-Granados for some clarifications regarding the song learning process.

19 Hindmarsh situates both starlings and blackbirds in an intermediate position in the "range of mimics", a range peaked by the marsh warbler and the super lyrebird. The blackbirds merit this intermediate position because they "ocassionally, but regularly, imitate," and the starlings because "all individuals incorporate several or many imitations": Andrew M. Hindmarsh, "Vocal Mimicry in Starlings," *Behaviour* 90, no. 4 (January 1, 1984): 302–24.

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chose me—because it seems that, wherever I go, I have them singing, and imitating, outside my window, even while I am trying to work on other things. On the one hand, there was the first bird, already mentioned, who fooled me for days. It all began with what I thought was a great tit (*Parus major*) singing from the communal gardens surrounding my open window somewhere in the coastal area in the south of Spain. But then great tits were not usually around there, not in the gardens. Nevertheless, I kept overhearing the same bit of song, day after day, and I was confused since I wasn't able to locate any great tit nearby. This was until I realised that the bird doing the singing wasn't a great tit, but a blackbird, one *mirlo*, mimicking the song of a great tit.[20] This blackbird had been fooling me for a while; therefore, in a way, it felt as if this particular blackbird was reversing the situation, asserting his agency, deceiving rather than being deceived, archiving instead of being archived.

On the other hand, after later becoming aware that this blackbird also mimicked many other things and birds, I realised while staying in the middle of the Iberian Peninsula that spotless starlings outside my window were also sounding like other birds, singing from the top of a pine tree—at least one of them is doing so right now, yet again, while I try to write and concentrate during this late summer: I hear a common treecreeper, magpie, another great tit or similar bird, Iberian green woodpecker, perhaps an alarm, and a bit of the (nowadays almost always) recorded pan flute announcement of the itinerant knife sharpener, *el afilador*. Another reason why I see *mirlos* and *estorninos* as a good choice is because both of these species are able to learn new songs and sounds during their whole life. Namely, the two species exhibit open-ended learning, unlike close-ended-learning birds whose songs become crystallised, fixed, after a certain period of time.[21]

Common or Eurasian blackbirds are thrushes, belonging to the same family of other species like song thrushes or American robins, and can be found across Europe, areas of Asia and the north of Africa and in Australia and New Zealand as an introduced species.[22] Spotless starlings are more localised, living in an area that spreads from the south of France across the Iberian Peninsula towards the north of Africa, and Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily.[23] They are closely related to

20 I first mentioned this blackbird and his great tit mimicry in: Concepción Cortés Zulueta, "Mirar a Las Aves Mirar… y Hacer (Arte)," *Boletín de Arte*, no. 40 (November 19, 2019): 27–42.

21 Hultsch and Todt, "Learning to Sing," 84–85.

22 Rafael J. Aparicio, "Mirlo común—*Turdus merula* Linnaeus, 1758," in Enciclopedia Virtual de los Vertebrados Españoles, eds. A. Salvador, M. Morales (Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, Madrid, 2016). http://hdl.handle.net/10261/110953.

23 José Pablo Veiga et al., "Estornino negro—*Sturnus unicolor* Temminck, 1820," in Enciclopedia Virtual de los Vertebrados Españoles, eds. A. Salvador, M. Morales (Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, Madrid, 2016). http://hdl.handle.net/10261/111673. This distribution

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another species of starling, the common or European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*, in Spanish *estorninos pintos*, or mottled starlings), so similar that in the future the two may end up merged and considered as the same species.

Common blackbirds

In order to approach any bird like a living archive, it is relevant to consider the structure in which this bird is storing and then performing the sounds. Internally, this implies the processes of learning, memorising and retrieving linked to that specific avian brain. Externally, this would refer to the aural, sonic structure that encompasses the sounds and that is uttered by the bird. For instance, the blackbird's song shares certain structural characteristics with other songs sung by birds of the same species. Blackbird songs have two main parts: the whistle and the twitter.[24] The whistle is sung first, and it is more melodious. It is followed by the twitter, which sounds harsher and even electronic. A simple blackbird song has a whistle followed by a twitter and lasts a few seconds (2–5 s). Each blackbird is able to sing several different whistles and several different twitters. Some of these whistles and twitters are shared with one or more local blackbirds, forming local tunes, and some are individual, distinct, and define and make possible to identify a particular blackbird, who can combine two or more whistles with two or more twitters in the same song. In principle, he can introduce imitations both in the whistle or the twitter, but I have heard these mimicries mostly as segments included in twitter parts. These twitters are elaborated and composed through the combination of several bits of sound. After an uninterrupted sung phrase, a blackbird will pause to listen to other blackbirds and then sing another sentence in response, pause again, sing again, and during spring and summer, he will do this for hours.

Apparently, not all blackbirds imitate or learn sounds other than their species-specific song, and not that much attention has been paid to their vocal mimicries.[25] But there are individuals, like the local blackbird who first deceived me and that is captured in the image while singing at the top of his lungs from one of his preferred spots [Fig. 1], who are accomplished mimics, and who introduce tens of *foreign* sounds—for lack of a better word—into their songs. Since they are

explains why I often hear these species singing outside my window. At times it is tricky to focus, and instead I go to the window to listen. Just at this moment, the starlings are busy again…

24 Robert Rasmussen and Torben Dabelsteen, "Song Repertoires and Repertoire Sharing in a Local Group of Blackbirds," *Bioacoustics* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 63–76.

25 For example, blackbird mimicries are not mentioned in this otherwise comprehensive entry: Rafael J. Aparicio, "Mirlo común."

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able to learn and form new songs throughout their whole lives, at some point they encounter a sound and decide to learn and to repeat it. If this sound comes from or has been produced by another bird or animal—humans included—this means that the blackbird involved has been near this animal, or near the element or device making it and close enough so he could listen, learn and store that sound.



For instance, in an article published in 1962, the musician and ornithologist Joan Hall-Craggs documented and studied the evolution of the song of another individual blackbird during a reproductive season.[26] Hall-Craggs describes how she witnessed and recorded the moment when this specific blackbird, after listening a few times to a blue tit calling and scolding on the same roof that he was standing, proceeded to imitate the sound, and then to repeat it again and again as part of his song over the following months. That moment, recorded on tape by Hall-Craggs, can also be *seen* and read in one of the spectrograms inserted in the article, with the succession of the whistle and the first part of the blackbird song, the blue tit scold in between, and then immediately followed by the blackbird copy of the call.[27] Hall-Craggs also explains how the blackbird plays around and composes his songs with this and other sounds, exploring different combina-

26 Joan Hall-Craggs, "The Development of Song in the Blackbird *Turdus Merula*," *Ibis* 104, no. 3 (July 1962): 277–300.

27 Ibid., 293.

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tions, mixing and reorganising some of the notes of his whistles in dialogue with other blackbirds that sing back to him. This continues until his repertoire becomes more or less fixed and all its sounds and tunes settle—for that season, at least.

When I began to record and to listen more closely to the songs of *my*[28] blackbird, I recognised many additional imitations by him besides the aforementioned segment of the song of a great tit. I also became aware of how he dialogued and exchanged songs with other local blackbirds. These other birds do repeat one or two imitations; albeit, with maybe one exception—the *tuit tuit* of a car being remotely locked— those mimicries coincide with the mimicries performed by the blackbird in the photograph. Thus, it is possible that those other local blackbirds may have learnt these sounds from him.

This meme-inspired diagram[29] conveys many but not all of the imitations compiled by *my* local blackbird in his songs [Fig. 2]. Some of them have several variants because the blackbird often mimics different calls from the same species. Given that he incorporates a chosen selection of the sounds he encounters, and since Iberian blackbirds normally remain in the same area, it feels like he is archiving, in his own way and through his own rules and preferences, the surrounding soundscape, and through this, the environment around him, including the mixed, hybrid nature of the place. It is a coastal area (as exemplified by his mimicry of a seagull call), and touristic but still rural—manifested through the imitation of the crowing of a rooster; there are also chickens, goats and plastic greenhouses nearby. Moreover, the area is characterised by a great human presence, as indicated by the mimicked human noises that are both mechanic or digital, old and new, and like a car alarm, a mobile phone or other beeping sounds. In addition, the blackbird imitates the screeching of car brakes and tires coming from a busy road and a roundabout a few meters away; there is also an engine roar that he might have picked up from the car workshop below the spot where he usually perches, or from the motorised tools employed in the gardens. Besides great tits, his song evocates and iterates many other wild species of birds

28 This is just to acknowledge my attachment towards this blackbird, who sings, listens and imitates outside of my window for hours. As Vinciane Despret suggested in her reading-cum-performance *Phonocène*, after a while, when you pause, listen and pay careful attention to the song of a blackbird, at some point the bird becomes "*votre merle*" (your blackbird). Especially, I should say, he is yours if you are able to recognise the bird and couldn't possibly mistake him for anyone else: CCCB. The Planet's Voices (Original Audio), 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRDpWnwh9ZY. See also: Vinciane Despret, *Habiter en oiseau* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2019), which I have discussed extensively in: Cortés Zulueta, "Silent Spring, Resounding Spring" (In Press).

29 Originally, I created this image as part of my presentation at Witnessing and Worlding Beyond the Human: An Interdisciplinary and Interspecies Conversation (May 28–29, 2021). See: https://mediaspace.illinois.edu/media/t/1_3itujrzl.

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present in the area, some of whom are predators and some others only seen and heard during summer, such as swallows. He also imitates introduced species like monk parakeets, which is a symptom of the degraded environment, and he briefly sings and sounds like a cat, a companion animal, linked to the human presence in the area. In a way, it is as if this blackbird is expressing and narrating this environment through the elements of the soundscape he has selected and then remembers, recovers and sings. This configures the blackbird's aural perspective of the area, a place archived and then performed by a nonhuman being. It is enriching and humbling to rediscover and to listen anew to the surrounding soundscape through this alternative *view* and this blackbird's agency—through his ears and songs, not to mention the melodies he shares with other local blackbirds, in a continuous back-and-forth sung dialogue. This is a cultural tradition worthy, why not, of technological preservation.



Spotless starlings

The archiving structure of spotless starlings—that is, both their songs and how they acquire and perform them and the sounds they imitate—greatly differs from that of blackbirds. Since spotless and common starlings' songs are so similar and there is not as much specific information regarding the former's, I will address the song for both of them. It can be divided into four sections: whistles, variable

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phrases, click trains, and high-frequency phrases.[30] Starlings, both males and females, can include imitations in each and every section of their songs, and they also imitate outside of them.[31] Every starling sings and imitates different sounds, and these birds can be very precise when copying a sound, even fooling experienced ornithologists.

Starlings are more communal during certain parts of the year, and it is believed that they have learnt most of their imitations from other fellow starlings rather than from the original source. This means that one starling learns to imitate a dog by actually listening to a dog, and another starling learns to imitate an oriole, and the rest of the starling group learn those mimicries indirectly from them.[32] Thus, the flock accumulates imitations and sounds, sharing a significant percentage, but not all of them, since each individual starling still keeps a distinct repertoire.[33] In line with this observation, it seems that starlings learn and share their whistles and imitations according to their closeness and social relations.[34] Hence, it may be possible to evaluate the degree of friendship between two birds depending on the percentage of songs they share: an intersubjective archive sensitive to social relations, which insists on its liveliness.

Therefore, for most of the starlings, the link with the mimicked source is indirect and mediated, but their accuracy of imitation is so high that, even when copying a copy, they usually sound very close to the original source. As stated by Hindmarsh: "The imitations are generally very accurate, witnessed by the fact that most ornithologists can relate an anecdote about how they have been fooled by a starling."[35] The exception would be when the aural source is not present in the area, and the local starlings don't have direct access to the original sound, meaning they might be copying from a copy of a copy of a copy. This happens with orioles, for instance—a species whose melodious songs starlings favour and readily imitate. In fact, studying two populations of European starling and spotless starling in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula, Motis found that the oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) was, by far, the commonest mimicked bird in both species of starlings and thus another manifestation of their similitudes.[36] However, when there are no orioles in an area, starlings can, at times, be heard sounding a bit like

30 Marcel Eens, "Understanding the Complex Song of the European Starling: An Integrated Ethological Approach," *Advances in the Study of Behaviour* 26 (1997): 355–434. For the similitudes between the songs of both species of starlings see: Anna Motis, "The Whistled Songs of the European Starling *Sturnus Vulgaris* and the Spotless Starling *Sturnus Unicolor* in North-East Spain," *Bioacoustics* 7, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 119–41.

31 On starlings' mimicries see: Hindmarsh, "Vocal Mimicry in Starlings," 302–24.

32 Ibid., 321.

33 Eens, "Understanding the Complex Song of the European Starling," 377–78.

34 Ibid., 377.

35 Hindmarsh, "Vocal Mimicry in Starlings," 303.

36 Motis, "The Whistled Songs," 129 and 136.

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orioles but in a strange, imprecise manner.[37] This has been explained through their possible ephemeral contact with a migrant starling from a region with orioles in it.[38] This opens up interesting, speculative options because studying the degree of dissolution of the imitation, it might be possible to estimate, in some manner, how long ago the encounter with an oriole (or with a starling that knew how an oriole sounded like) took place.

It is known that the imitations archived and accumulated by a group of starlings only last for a while in absence of the original sources, and then they disappear and end up substituted by imitations of species that are present in the area. This is confirmed by the common starlings introduced to Australia and New Zealand, who no longer repeat the songs and sounds that their ancestors may have learnt in their countries of origin.[39] Consequently, in line with their condition of living and lively and animated archives, each group of starlings and each starling become a collective, aural archive that remembers and performs a selection of the species and sounds present at a certain moment in time in the place where they live. According to this understanding of bird song, an archive or digital repository that stores recordings of starling vocalisations could be approached as a meta-archive—an archive within an archive. In other words, up to a certain degree, this is a co-constituted archive preserving songs that also come from living archives; these songs are like vessels previously containing mimicries of sounds of other birds and other animals from the surrounding soundscape, human beings included. With this in mind, I browsed several recordings of spotless starlings made in the north of Africa that had been uploaded to the open repository xeno-canto and found that it was possible to deduce a few things from the area where those starlings live, thanks to their songs.[40] For example, the presence of cats or dogs and, by association, the existence of a human population. Or the existence of a nearby surface of water due to the fact that the recorded starlings were mimicking how that water sounded. Other times, starlings archive humans through sounds in a more direct and telling manner. Like when, in a suburban area, the same flock of starlings is able to mimic three or four different alarms: a house alarm, another different house alarm, a car alarm, or a police car siren (or perhaps it was an ambulance'). The starlings produced a compilation of warnings, selected and continuously reproduced by the birds as they have heard them in their surroundings, with alarms blaring every other day. Furthermore, and again a mirror, maybe, the imitation of these alarms reflects an exacerbated

37 I have had this experience with spotless starlings, whose songs sounded more like an impression of an oriole than an imitation of an oriole.

38 Eens, "Understanding the Complex Song of the European Starling," 379.

39 Ibid., 380.

40 Willem-Pier Vellinga, "Xeno-Canto—Bird Sounds from around the World" (Xeno-canto Foundation for Nature Sounds, 2022).

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and misplaced human preoccupation with safety in times of climate change, which contributes to noise pollution and to the occasional confusion or deception.[41]

Finally, I would like to briefly delineate a case concerning spotless starlings and the paths it opens. Picture a group of spotless starlings who roost and nest between the tiles of the tower of a building located almost on top of a hill; the building is surrounded by open *dehesas*[42] of holm oaks and pastures somewhere in the middle of the Iberian plateau. These starlings wake up in the morning and start to sing, many of them at the same time, contributing to the songs and imitations of the other birds. They, as a group, display and perform the songs and sounds they have selected, learnt, remembered and archived, conjuring and making present many things that are not there, and could not be there, up on that roof.

Starlings are also different because, even when they are sedentary, they travel further away during the day and then bring back sounds that originate not that far away but still don't belong in that tower. Some of the imitations that can be heard are relatively subtle and not so shocking; they are not perceived as being out of place to the same extent. This includes the mimicked calls of common sparrows, for example, who could be found in the village close by but not in the open country or on that roof. Magpies, who are also closer to urbanised areas but still a regular inhabitant of a wider patch of terrain, may be imitated. On the other hand, there are sounds that could be really striking if you pause to consider them, such as a choir of angry ducks, a cat or a dog, the neigh of a horse, frogs, and maybe more water birds; even something so subtle and precise as the imitation of the whistling friction of the flapping wings of a Eurasian collared dove may be heard. This bird is not found there on that tower, either. All of these sounds, the mimicries, coming from above, from the roof of a tower—among them the imitated calls and songs of many other wild birds—constitute a living archive compiled and performed through the combined, collective agencies and subjectivities of a flock of starlings who are able to summon the surrounding soundscape, and environment, through avian imitations of some of its excerpts.

It is fascinating to ponder on the spotless starling chicks being born and raised within the gables of that tower before they fledge and learn to fly. These chicks listen to the sung dialogues and exchanges of their elders, full of mimicries of sounds they have never heard before—sounds and references that they experience through the voices and repetitions of birds of their own species. They listen

41 This has happened to me a couple of times when I mistakenly thought that an alarm was on and then realised it was an starling.

42 Richard Joffre et al., "The Dehesa: An Agrosilvopastoral System of the Mediterranean Region with Special Reference to the Sierra Morena Area of Spain," *Agroforestry Systems* 6, no. 1 (1 February 1988): 71–96.

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to threaded compilations weaved together by combining sound fragments archived in the fields and *dehesas* surrounding that tower. The sounds, for the moment, are out of their tangible reach, but not of their aural, mediated, mimicked one. At some point, they will probably fly away and meet the sonic sources of those imitations. It is difficult to wonder what they would think, then, and how they will feel…

Conclusions

On the whole, representing birds such as starlings and blackbirds as living archives opens up many interesting possibilities, of which this chapter offers only a tentative sample. First of all, this way of thinking about bird song can be extended to many other species, assuming careful attention is paid to their peculiarities and diverse archiving structures. Moreover, the instance of these living archives can also be shifted towards conventional, institutional archives. On the one hand, it provides a contrast that underlines aspects of archives that have been historically denied, omitted or minimised, such as performativity, their changes, or the expression of subjectivities within them. On the other hand, it points to other potential ways of dealing with birds and bird song within archives and repositories preserving recordings of animal vocalisations—especially with regard to the latter. Recordings of starlings can have, as already mentioned, a meta-archival and co-constituted dimension since their songs include many sounds that have been selected and excerpted by the birds from their surrounding environments. Hence, those recorded songs are not just defining the starlings themselves, as specimens and representatives of their own species, but they are also capturing an aural perspective of that environment at a specific point in time, and this may also be true for other animals.

Ultimately, addressing birds such as starlings or blackbirds as living archives means treating them as agents who are reversing a particular situation, swapping positions and archiving instead of being archived (or denied), objectifying instead of being objectified. This carries with it the power and ability to conjure things and beings that are not there, even to fool and to confuse others, such as humans, perhaps momentarily destabilizing certain hierarchies and assumptions.[43] Indeed, when we recognise ourselves as sung by a starling or a blackbird —when that inverting mirror is displayed in front of us—it opens a door that

43 For a discussion on the unfolding of these hierarchies around visual deceptions and illusions see: W. J. T. Mitchell, "Illusion: Looking at Animals Looking," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), a chapter I thoroughly addressed in: Cortés Zulueta, "Mirar a Las Aves Mirar," 27–42.

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allows us to see ourselves as others, as archived and represented by certain nonhuman beings and to wonder about if, and how, we are other, and represented like others, by other nonhumans.

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Bogdan Mihai Florea (University of Bristol)

Continuing Chekhov's Project for a Non-human Theatre in *The Seagull*

Abstract
Functioning as the first movement of a much ampler, symphonic project titled *Expel the Human from the Theatre,* the paper proposes an imaginary dialogue between myself and Treplev, the main character of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull.* The conversation focuses on the topic of decentering the human presence in theatre and speculates on how Treplev might have understood such decentering, had he continued to make theatre instead of committing suicide in the fourth act of Chekhov's play. The central question is what may be the best way in which the human can be expelled from the theatre in order to allow the more-than-human to enter the stage. The conversation touches on issues such as the self-referentiality of the human in theatre and the necessity to practice the art of dying as theatre-makers – Treplev's proposed solution for expelling the human from the theatre. Introducing concepts such as theatre in the place of animals, theatre as a boomerang, theatre as a terrarium, and theatre as a vestigial organ, the paper engages tentatively with the thinking of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Peter Sloterdijk, being one of the first attempts to link some of Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical thinking with questions pertaining to theatre studies.
Keywords: Treplev, theatre, boomerang, art of dying, vestigial organ

Introduction – Expel the Human from the Theatre – Opening Movement

When the pandemic hit and theatres closed, I was happy. In the same way that I was happy about cars not driving on the roads and polluting any longer, clothing shops not selling clothes made in countries where people are paid a pittance, factories stopping (for a short time, at least) their eternally moving conveyor belts, planes no longer taking off in all directions. When the pandemic hit and theaters closed, I exclaimed: Expel the human for the theatre! Leave theatres empty forever! Banish the human from the theatre! Leave the human – like Adam and Eve in the old story – forever outside the gates! Was the anathema "expel the human from the theatre" just a bizarre combination of words, which appeared in

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the mind out of the blue? Was it just an innocent outburst? Its potential causes needed to be identified. What could have been the origin of such an outburst? Was it hate? Was it the sense of relief at not having to see theatres functioning like commercial enterprises in which self-hypnotizing audiences behave like mere customers and consumers? Was it personal frustration? Some strange type of bitterness? Was it possibly depression, as someone later suggested? All these questions and many others constitute the basis of the project called *Expel the Human from the Theatre.* The aim of the project (which, at the time of writing this piece, is still growing) was quite simply to understand what may have been behind the "expel the human from the theatre" thunderous exclamation. Another aim was to understand what implications such an utterance could have for me as a theatre-maker. If, for the sake of experimentation, I was to accept that it was indeed hate, frustration or some other form of malaise which caused the inexplicable outburst, would that be definitively a negative, destructive thing, which I should seek to address and correct? Had there been other theatre-makers, thinkers, characters who thought like me?

I have structured the project *Expel the Human from the Theatre* as a symphony, dividing it into distinct movements:

> In music, movement refers to independent sections of classical music that are part of a larger composition. Performances with multiple movements, while sometimes performed separately, must always be performed in succession. There's no set length to these divisions, some can be quite short, others extremely long […] a symphony can have as many movements as the composer likes.[1]

Each movement of my symphonic project represents an individual performative encounter (in different registers and styles) with a real person (living or dead) or fictional character that may have spoken – even involuntarily – from a nihilistic, critical perspective about theatre or about the human in theatre. Some of the people and/or characters with whom I performatively interact are Konstantin Gavrilovic Treplev from Anton Pavlovic Chekhov's play *The Seagull*, philosophers Plato, Denis Diderot and Peter Sloterdijk, Marina Abramovic, Jorge de Burgos from Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose,* eco-terrorists and others. I create fraternities through shared malaise and nihilism with such partners and form a circle dance of negative, critical views of theatre.

In this opening movement of *Expel the Human from the Theatre*, I entertain a conversation with Konstantin Gavrilovic Treplev, under the title *Continuing Chekhov's Project for a Non-human Theatre in The Seagull.* I have always been intrigued by the fact that Anton Chekhov did not allow his famous character

1 Pro Musician Hub, *What Is a Movement in Music? Definition, Examples, and Composers,* (online: What Is a Movement in Music? Definition, Examples & Composers (promusicianhub.com)), last accessed: 31/10/2022.

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Treplev to elaborate more on his thinking vis-a-vis the theatre. Why didn't Chekhov allow Treplev's own play – written for his then-lover Nina Zarechnaya (an aspirant actor) and staged in such a manner that both impressed and annoyed his mother Arkadina (a well-known actor) – to continue until the end? In the first act of *The Seagull*, we are only allowed to catch a glimpse of Treplev's much-awaited mise-en-scène, before the curtain abruptly falls as a result of a fiery exchange between the young, non-conventional, rebellious playwright and his rather indisposed actor-mother. Whilst in acts two and three we don't learn anything new about Treplev's playwriting, in the fourth act of *The Seagull*, we discover that Treplev had already started to publish, although it is not entirely clear how successful a writer he had become. It seems that he was no longer writing plays. Chekhov thus leaves the entire question of Treplev as a playwright and theatre-maker open to speculation. The first movement of *Expel the Human from the Theatre* is motivated by a number of questions: Has Treplev written and staged his play only to confront a mother who was ignoring him and to win young Nina's attention? Had his first attempt at theatre not been rendered a fiasco by an unorderly audience, would he have continued? If so, what kind of plays would he have written and/or directed? Would his seemingly unconventional ideas have made an impact? Would Treplev's ideas about playwriting and theatre-making have been revolutionary? As Chekhov remained rather cryptic on this topic, I find it necessary to continue investigating Treplev's ideas on theatre by tying them to my argument about the need to expel the human from the theatre. I have thus resurrected the character for the conversation below.

ME: Dear Treplev, I am very happy that, through our conversation, I will be able to somehow prolong your life after that most unfortunate incident at the end of act four when you decided to kill yourself. It is very good to have you here because I want to provoke you to think what it would be like to expel the human from the theatre.

TREPLEV: Thank you for your kind invitation. Your topic, I must say, sounds most interesting.

ME: I have been particularly drawn to your ideas regarding the human in theatre. In Chekhov's play, you provide some fascinating insight, and I would like to invite you to perhaps clarify and expand on it. In act one, you famously said:

> I have no respect for the theatre. My mother loves the theatre, she seems to think she's a servant of humanity or the sacred cause of art, whereas, as far as I'm concerned, the modern theatre's in a blind alley, a fenced-off, blind alley. When the curtain goes up and those great geniuses, those priests of sacred art, artificially lit, in a room with three walls, reproduce the way people eat, drink, love, move about and put their jackets on; when

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> they try to concoct some moral out their crass scenes and dreary lines – some petty, oversimplified moral, some one-size-fits-all moral for handy domestic use; when I'm offered a thousand varieties of the same thing, over and over and over again – then I run for it, run away like Maupassant ran from the Eiffel Tower, because its crass vulgarity was pulverizing his brain.[2]

When you were talking about the fourth wall and the modern theatre, were you referring to a particular genre or convention? It seemed to me that you were signaling a deeper malaise, which spread beyond genres and conventions, namely the fact that in theatre there is too much of the human.

TREPLEV: Indeed, I was focusing on humans and on the excess of humanness, so to speak, in theatre. By saying eat, drink, love, move about, I was pointing towards the entire spectrum of human preoccupations, actions, feelings present, presented and represented on stage. In other words, I wanted to encompass all that could be seen as belonging to the realm of the human and that polluted the stage. I was not referring only to realist, naturalist conventions or to any particular sort of modern theatre. The problem consisted, in my view, in the central position that the human assumed in the machinery that we call theatre. I was getting fed up with the amount of humanness on stage and I was signaling the need for a different approach.

ME: What do you refer to when you call theatre a machinery?

TREPLEV: I see theatre as a kind of implement, device or machinery with which we address – or like to think we address – a certain problem or task. Think of any kind of tool that we use for our various gardening tasks, our building tasks, for travelling, etc. Theatre has been famously described as a mirror held up to the world – in that sense, it is an implement and a machinery, one that relies on material bits or parts and on a sort of technology, an object – the mirror – and a technology – mirroring. The problem, for me, is that it is just the human looking into the theatrical mirror, and by getting absorbed by the mirroring game, he loses sight of the important things that are taking place around him.

There is another aspect. Theatre is a place in which we look at each other (some perform, others watch) in order to be able to, apparently, see ourselves. Humans imitate humans, actors imitate audiences, audiences imitate actors. Imitation revolves around itself. Such a formula shows us that theatre-making relies on an enclosing, claustrophobic technology, in which what is human is being circulated again and again like the air conditioning of an air-tight capsule. Inside this

2 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 11–12.

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capsule that we call theatre, humans do nothing other than imitate and reproduce what is human about themselves, afterwards regurgitating and ruminating on each other's impressions, mirrorings, representations. Can you just imagine the poverty of outside-of-the-human-realm reference points that the machinery of theatre has the potential to create? How can you ever hope to know more than what is being recirculated in our air-tight capsule? How can you expand your horizons if the only things you get to reflect on are imitations to the n^{th} degree of the humanness of yourself and others like you, or worse, the very limited humanness that you are able to recognize in yourself and others? As a machinery (with all its cogs and parts) whose operation can be very roughly described as, "you come up and do something on a stage/platform of some kind and I look at you and by doing that I somehow manage to look at or inside myself," theatre fosters a mechanism for inbreeding, in which we, humans, agree to happily feed on our own excrement, thinking that that is the good way. Theatre is like a terrarium from which we don't seem to want to escape, and which harbors the redundancy of our humanness. Theatre is a powerful symbol of our stubborn belief in self-sustaining, toxic, human air-filled jars. There are many other similar jars, with the economy being perhaps the biggest of all. In the field of economy, we show similar levels of delusion when we think that we can change things just by remaining focused on ourselves, the humans, even when it is more than evident that we need to bring other, non-human stakeholders into the equation. But I am not a specialist in economy, so I shouldn't shift the discussion in that direction. Returning to theatre, it is a machinery that has the gift of estranging us from the non-human world, rather than – as we prefer to believe – making us any wiser as to who we are and how we can better ourselves. It is, again, through the non-humans or through expelling the human as you like to say, that we can escape the fundamental delusion of theatre.

Therefore, expelling the human from the theatre might really be about how we can take the lid off this entrapping jar and interrupt the eternally revolving actor-spectator (human-human) loop of the theatrical terrarium. Do we have the courage to undertake that kind of experimentation? Or is it that the phenomenon of self-referentiality that underpins theatre is inextricably linked to humans' stubbornness to lock themselves (for cultural, educational, economic and entertainment purposes, purportedly) in closed circuits, in merry-go-rounds in which you will always be guaranteed the same view, once you have completed the required 360-degree rotation around your own axis.

ME: You are in fact arguing against what we could call the human's narcissism manifested through or in theatre. That reminds me of the humorous manner in which Peter Sloterdijk has described Narcissus. In *Rage and Time*, the philosopher refers to the mythological character as to "a young man with a moronic

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character, someone incapable of differentiating between his mirror image and himself" and acting as a "miserable admirer of his own image."[3] If I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that theatre's fundamental effect and function – the terrarium effect, as you call it – is profoundly degenerative, in the sense that it is making humans ever more confused and incapable of differentiating between themselves and their mirrored image as it is presented or represented on stage.

TREPLEV: Quite right! I should add that I believe that throughout the ages, we have developed something that could be called a theatre organ. Narcissus' stupidity reveals the erroneous way in which this organ functions. Instead of searching for your reflection on the surface of the water, you look for it in the human who performs on stage and like Narcissus, you become the victim of your theatre organ, which is wrongly wound, wrongly tuned.

ME: I find the idea of the theatre organ rather interesting. Can I invite you to say a bit more about it?

TREPLEV: Theatre organ or organ of theatre may not be the best choice of words, but I'm not a philosopher and my intention is really only to underline the fact that theatre happens, before all else, in the mind; it has become a function of the human brain, so to speak. So, we make or take part in theatre even when we are not materially involved in a theatrical event. The theatre and the stage are ingrained in us as a theatre organ. My argument is that this organ is, for some reason, maladjusted, inefficient and envelopes us ever more in our humanness, isolating us from the rest of the world. Its main effect on us is estrangement. It is that maladjustment that I was trying to redress with my play, but, as you know, I haven't been given the chance. And I think it is the same maladjustment that you allude to in the formula "expel the human from the theatre."

How can we therefore alter or redress the human self-referencing, which I consider to be the fundamental fault of theatre, and do away with repetitiveness, toxic familiarity, stupid mirroring, dead-easy recognition, aesthetic inbreeding and self-isolation, eating of one's own tail, obsessive self-reflections in the form of to-and-fros between audiences and actors and most importantly, the continuous, successful training of that highly unusual talent of not being able to see anything else outside the circuit of human/human-holding-a-mirror-to-the-human. What term of the doomed equation of theatre must be changed in order to curtail the damaging effects?

3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation,* trans. Mario Wenning, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 15.

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ME: Peter Sloterdijk comes again to mind when he talks about a "closed communication dome [where] the inhabitants keep inhaling their own exhalations."[4] In this air-tight human-bound capsule, what is human is circulated and recirculated, emanated, and then reabsorbed. The paradox and the seemingly inescapable dilemma of theatre consists in the fact that its doomed equation, as you say, is inextricably linked to the human. Many would argue that we cannot do without the human factor, without its agency in theatre. On the other hand, a new kind of theatre is being created in which the human has been at least partially decentered; the human has taken a step back, allowing the non-human or other-than-human, such as animals or artificial intelligence, to take precedence.

TREPLEV: You'll have to forgive me if I am not entirely up to date with technological developments in theatre-making; you must remember that I shot myself in the head more than a century ago. A lot has happened. Therefore, I am not entirely sure how an animal or some form of artificial intelligence would be able to acquire or use their agency in theatre-making or even how they would deliberately employ their own agency to overshadow or supplant human agency. I am also not entirely convinced about the inclination or propensity of non-human or other-than-human actors, so to speak, towards theatre-making. Remember, this implies you becoming a miserable, confused admirer of what you wrongly believe to be your own image. It is hard to see how a form of artificial intelligence (intelligence, NB), a pig, a worm or a chicken could be daft enough to do that. Also, I can't imagine an insect, or an artificial life form for that matter, expressly wishing to see or make theatre. My idea was somewhat different: not to dislocate the human from within theatre but to dislocate the theatre from within the human. I believe therefore that the curse of theatre (its doomed equation) is that it is like a boomerang: it can only be the human throwing the boomerang in order for it to come back to the human. We have to break that circuit, and in order to do that we need to attack what is theatrical or theatre within us. That might sound problematic and controversial, but I will endeavor to clarify by giving an example of my method.

ME: How do you envisage theatre being dislocated from within the human?

TREPLEV: Let me say that, to me, theatre is like a head – a sealed, shielded dome-skull draped-in-muscle-and-skin, a place where conditions are controlled to preserve what is the precious interior. You wouldn't normally be tempted to crack your head because the precious matter inside would not be able to with-

4 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 3: Foams. Plural Spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016), 175.

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stand the attack of the forces of the corrosive outside. The precious brain operates in controlled conditions, well pampered in its secluded kingdom. In theatre, too, the greatest temptation is to create and maintain controlled environments, spaces of refuge from the outside world, comfortable environments enveloped in technologies of illusion. These have the gift of confusing us. The example of the head is – I think – a very effective one. It shows both the internalized (the organ) and the externalized dimensions of theatre.

ME: I would still like to press you to provide a few more concrete examples as to what your strategy is.

TREPLEV: Of course. In Chekhov's play, I had already started an experiment, and the first stage of that experiment was called the makeshift theatre. The first step towards expelling the human from the theatre (which is expelling the theatre from within the human), is to build makeshift theatres – similar to the one that I had built by the lake. Remember what I said to my uncle Sorin before the start of my play:

> Here it is, our theatre! A curtain, one wing, the other and beyond that, empty space. No set of any kind. Open view on to the lake, and the horizon. We'll raise the curtain at exactly half-past eight, as the moon is rising.[5]

ME: Do you mean to say that your building of an open-air theatre functioned as a symbolic gesture: you opened your theatre in the garden to the more-than-human and the non-human and allowed nature to become the set of your play. By taking down the walls of your theatre, you allowed nature to frame and come into the performance space. I can imagine why your famous mother and her mediocre writer-boyfriend would have smiled ironically.

In the current context, when we are losing so much of our biodiversity, when natural habitats are being destroyed at an alarming rate, it is more important than ever to ask the question of how we could invite the other-than-human or the non-human on stage and do away with what Peter Sloterdijk called the "excessive cloture of imaginary self-presence, under the pretext of self-preservation, ending up in a vortex of self-destruction."[6] In a certain way, your theatre by the lake was sending a strong signal to the then very disappointed audience made up of self-centered half-wits, frustrated old people, jealous, superficial thespians and mediocre writers about your intention to make a puncture, to allow a breach into the human-dependent sphere of theatre. With today's drastic reduction of natural

5 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 10.

6 Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, trans. Christopher Turner, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 100.

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habitats, it is crucial that we find ways to permit the more-than-human and the non-human to enter the stage and cleanse, with their "other" universes, reference systems, expressiveness, stories and realities "the pathogenic air conditioners of standardized and aroused"[7] human self-referentiality.

TREPLEV: I am sure that my makeshift theatre by the lake could be understood as a symbolic gesture but not in the sense that you've just highlighted. We must remember that open-air theatre had been around at least since the ancient Greeks – mine wouldn't have been such a great invention. However, I do not want to completely rule out the environmental key in which you have just read my makeshift theatre. I think it has great merit – it's only that I look at it from a somewhat different perspective.

The key is in the word makeshift. We should all build makeshift theatres, which means that we should all start building (or rebuilding) collapsible, itinerant, improvised theatres like we used to do when we were children. That is what I had in mind with my shaky, shacky theatre by the lake. Two or three sticks, some thread and a bed cover for curtain. It is this childlikeness that I was aiming for. This return to childhood was sufficient to generate a serious impact: it ridiculed all that my mother (and by extension all adults, humans) believed in; it made a joke out of all her acquired theatre wisdom and revealed the theatre organ as an atrophied one. The first step in eliminating ourselves as humans from the theatre is to start becoming childlike. It is not easy, admittedly, and it implies something akin to a spiritual technique: one must unlearn things in order to become childlike. One must undergo a sort of process of purification through regression; that is, unless they possess the precious gift of childlikeness, a person must become not fully adult, not fully human, like me.

Again, the key word here is makeshift – building improvised venues; venues that we can carry on our backs like snails; venues that are incredibly fragile and perishable; venues that show how unimportant theatre really is and how we should never trust in it, lest we want to be deceived. My theory is that theatre should stop being treated as a modality of mirroring our being in the world. Instead, it should be considered a playground for children where the humans are childlike. That is again another complex topic, which branches out in many directions – it speaks to the idea of the origins of theatre, for instance. My belief is that theatre originates in children's playing not in religious rites and rituals. Theatre does not originate in anything adult (to be read human) anyway. But we shouldn't venture in that direction now.

7 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 3: Foams. Plural Spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016), 175.

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ME: I want to come back to the point you made about makeshift. When you say makeshift, it makes me think about failure as well. It is the failure of building something proper; the failure to complete the circuit; the failure to make "round" sense; the incapacity to really architect something according to pre-established rules and wisdom. I think that's what you might also mean by makeshift – the amateur dimension of it all, but amateur in the sense of naïve, childlike, as you were saying. This reminds me of Judith Halberstam's remarks in *The Queer Art of Failure:* "Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."[8]

TREPLEV: Indeed, we should all have our makeshift theatres as a way to show our failure of the human in theatre. And that should only be the beginning of the process of unbecoming, as Halberstam says. It is the wonkiness, the improvisedness, the stupidity, non-conformity, failed nature of a makeshift theatre that can start us off on a profitable road to expelling the human. What can be more efficacious in expelling the human from the theatre or the theatre from the human if not returning to the child, who is an incompletely developed human, a homunculus. We should start by searching for ourselves as theatrical homunculi, as homunculi theatre-makers. Maybe we already contain these makeshift theatres. They are hidden in the attics or basements of our selves, amongst our childhood memories, harking back to the days when we used to build theatres in our rooms, in our gardens, in the fields. These makeshift theatres need to be liberated. I think I did just that when I built my theatre by the lake.

ME: What would the next steps be on this exciting path that you are describing?

TREPLEV: I think you'll find that the next step rhymes quite well with your preoccupations vis-a-vis the environment and its destruction. In our makeshift, ridiculous, unserious, non-adult (non-human) theatres, we should invite characters other than those of human form: children and childlike humans have the power to do that, don't they? They have the real power of becoming animals, plants, the sky. In the monologue that I composed for Nina, I was calling onto the stage such a non-human character: a kind of post-apocalyptic, kaleidoscopic spirit that encapsulated life in all its manifoldness, after its many concrete instantiations had been swept away by a cataclysmic event.

> Human beings, lions, eagles and partridges, antlered deer, geese, spiders, fish, silent beneath the waters, starfish and invisible microscopic creatures – all living things, their

8 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Act of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–3.

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> tragic cycle finally complete, are now extinct. For thousands of centuries, no living species has moved across the face of the earth and this poor moon has shone her lamp in vain. The cranes no longer wake whooping in the meadow and in the lime groves of May beetles are silent. Cold, cold, cold. Bleak, bleak, bleak. Petrifying, petrifying, petrifying. *Pause.* The bodies of all living creatures have crumbled into dust, and the eternal laws of matter have transformed them into rock, into water, into clouds, and their souls have melted into one soul. And I… I am that universal soul! Human consciousness and animal instinct are combined in me, and I know everything, everything, everything. I live each life anew within myself.[9]

ME: Today's human-induced destruction of the environment makes your scenario from a century ago look very realistic. The void, the desolation, the dereliction, the desertification engulfing our planet and the extinguishing of all life forms are now real possibilities.

TREPLEV: I had a vision of a theatre in which human consciousness had been extended so that it could combine with the referential systems and personal universes of the animals, of the minerals and of matter, represented in my play by that univocal-multivocal character. Being set in a time of post-disappearance and desertification, the character haunting my non-walled, makeshift theatre is the sum of the ghosts of all once-living creatures. Their theatrical displays unfold in a multi-perspectival canvas at that point when the human consciousness expands (it loses its strict boundaries – here you can think of Yoga meditation exercises or other such techniques, if you want, but also children's playing techniques) and meets the consciousness of the non-human or other-than-human. By doing that (i. e., reducing the human consciousness' strict boundaries), you are taking another step towards expelling the human from the stage and expelling the stage from yourself.

ME: That is indeed fascinating. All you have said can be rephrased as theatre in the place of the non-humans that die or theatre in the place of animals; a kind of theatre in the place of dinosaurs. Theatre as a wake for the dying Earth. I took the expression "theatre in the place of animals" from Gilles Deleuze, who in Claire Parnet's interview titled *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z*, said – almost in passing – that "a writer writes for non-readers: not intended for them but in their place. We should write in the place of animals! Not for, but in the place of animals that die."[10]

9 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 18–19.

10 Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parnet, Pierre-André Boutang, Charles J. Stivale, Sylvère Lotringer, *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z*, (South Pasadena, USA: Semiotext(e), 2015) DVD.

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Fascinated by the provocative, prophetic nature of these words, I wondered what it would mean to write or make theatre in the place of animals. I asked myself: how would it be if a play were no longer about human lovers, haters, princes, kings, criminals, etc.? Instead – without the play turning into a fable (a story with humanized animal characters, in which the non-human conscience is colonized by the human one) – how would it be if we could write or make theatre in the place of a farmed chicken, of a pig who lived its whole life in a cage, of a bird building a nest, of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, etc. Also, if they could, what kind of theatre would animals make and what would they choose to say about themselves, about their characters, so to speak, and about their entire lives/experiences? And more: How do we begin to think about how to act or to make theatre in the place of animals? If such acting or theatre-making is indeed possible, what would it be based on? How would we need to alter and transform the way we think about our bodies, our voices, our posture, our movements, our entire organisms in order to withstand the crushing burden of the animal's expressive universes?

TREPLEV: I find that idea very interesting indeed. Theatre seen as a wake for the dying Earth should at the same time be theatre about yourself, the human who's dying. These two things need to go hand in hand. As I was saying, we need, first of all, an extension of our conscience, which is achievable through the makeshift and the childlike. But we also need to take the next step: learning to die together with the non-humans that die. This is the final step of my plan: to kill the theatre-maker in you; to render the theatre organ obsolete. To kill yourself as a theatre-maker means to kill something in you. In the post-apocalyptic environment that I imagined in my play, the makeshift theatre was a window through which death looked back at us, its human spectators; my makeshift stage was a wormhole that allowed us to intuit the movements of a chthonic underbelly. Tearing down three walls of the theatre and bringing on stage that multivocal character had the potential to expose all of us to a sinking, sucking lure into a deathly mulch. Remember?

> I'm alone. Once in every hundred years I raise my voice to speak and the sound echoes melancholy through the void and no one hears… Not even you hear me, pale fires… The stagnant marsh pushes you out into the darkness and you wander until dawn, unthinking, unconsenting, lacking the vital spark.[11]

ME: Therefore, the crux of your vision is that theatre should in the end – after it will have passed through the childlike – become a school of dying. Theatre should

11 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 19.

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be used as an instrument for learning how to die as a human and expand – in a childlike, naïve way, as you say – your conscience to such a degree that it combines or meets with that of the non-human. You may find that you have something in common with some die-hard Christian hermits, who can always be observed training very hard to die. Again, Peter Sloterdijk's thinking in *The Art of Philosophy* is quite helpful in this direction. He speaks about the philosopher who trains in an "ars moriendi, the art of dying."[12] He speaks about Socrates, Plato or Heidegger who strived to become a species of "philosophically dead who cast off their bodies and apparently become pure intellects or impersonal thinking souls," by "activat[ing] such a capacity for perceiving the everlasting during [their] lifetime," and by trying "to die 'in advance' not so as to be dead for longer but to reveal [the] latent capacity for immortality while remaining trapped in [a] mortal shell."[13]

TREPLEV: The art of dying as a theatre-maker. Killing the theatre in you. Killing your humanness in theatre. Let us make that very clear.

ME: Yes, because you have become an artist of dying in the other sense, too.

TREPLEV: Indeed. I tried two times to commit suicide, by shooting myself in the head (the image of the head is quite relevant). The second time I succeeded. That might have nothing to do with our topic because the story was complex – it involved my love for Nina, jealousy of Trigorin, etc.. Or it might have everything to do with our topic because there were things that I have learned after drilling the second, fatal hole in my head.

ME: Could you please elaborate on that?

TREPLEV: By the time I reached act four of Mr. Chekhov's play, my makeshift theatre had already become a ruin. One character I think said: "We should tell them to demolish that stage out there. It's stuck there, as bare and repulsive as a skeleton, with the curtain flapping in the wind."[14] Although I relished the thought that my theatre was perishing, consumed and performed on by the elements, I felt that I still had not been able to totally uproot myself, to totally eliminate the theatrical organ from myself. I felt that I was still acting as a semi-detached spectator. The boomerang was still coming back to me, the human who had once

12 Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy. Wisdom as a Practice*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.
13 Ibid., 3–4.
14 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 61.

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thrown it towards the non-human. The chthonic mulch was tempting me. There was one final wall that needed to come down. Therefore, I asked myself how can I expel myself from the theatre and I made the final gesture. With a gun, I pierced through and opened a hole in my head: in an instant, the seal was broken, the final wall – the true, real fourth wall – collapsed, all conditions changed, the all too precious interior offered itself up for invasion. The character on stage could now come over me. The human spectator had finally expelled himself from the theatre – the last wall to demolish, having always been myself.

ME: With a pull of the trigger, you allowed the human element of the doomed equation of theatre to "be swept along by the current flowing from the background to the foreground, from Lethe into the clearing, from enfolding onto unfolding,"[15] as Peter Sloterdijk noted.

TREPLEV: You seem to have developed something akin to an obsession for this Peter Sloterdijk. Don't worry, that is not a criticism. After all, I too have been described as having an obsessive personality. Maybe you can do the next installment of your project with Sloterdijk. I think you'd have plenty of things to talk about.

ME: I plan to create a performance inspired by some of his writings.

TREPLEV: That sounds marvelous. In any case, to come back to our discussion, by shooting myself, I was solving the dilemma. I would no longer be the one throwing the boomerang and the boomerang would no longer come back to me. The derelict stage was invaded by the non-human and now, its human spectator (me) was letting himself being invaded too. The central element became the bullet hole: a frame through which I was going to make myself part of a theatre of the future, in which the human agency had been totally eliminated. I would peep directly through the magic keyhole created by the bullet onto the derelict stage, and the derelict stage (and what inhabited it) would peep right back into me. I would no longer be the spectator because what was on stage would now pass freely into and through me. I would be one with the derelict, deserted, collapsing carcass of my makeshift theatre. I would attach myself – with the red glue dried around the bullet hole – to the crumbling structure of the makeshift, offering my whole self to be performed on.

15 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 3: Foams. Plural Spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016), 72.

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ME: But surely things could have gone wrong, and maybe they did go wrong; we can never know as Chekhov never told us. Something quite embarrassing could have happened – you could have ended with just a scratch, like when you tried to shoot yourself the first time. Or, I don't know, you might have survived by some sort of miracle; the hole may have healed, and you would have kept on living in a crippled condition, deprived of your much wished for theatre without the human.

TREPLEV: You are perfectly right. We – I – don't know what happened to me after the play's last line: "Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself."[16] If we could ask Chekhov, he might say to us that I have also survived the second suicide attempt. We don't know! But the image of a hole in the head as a way to break the doomed equation of theatre is already a big discovery. We must learn how to die as theatre-makers. Every day, like the monks that you mentioned. Every day we have to blow a new bullet hole in our theatre organs.

ME: What is the lasting, so to say, effect of this exercise?

TREPLEV: The appearance of the vestigial organ. The organ of theatre finally becomes a vestigial organ. The bullet hole becomes a reminder – like the appendix, the third eyelid or the tailbone – of times long gone, when the stage used to be – like my head – an enclosed, walled universe in which humans performed for humans about humans. The vestigial organ reminds us of a function that no longer exists. I have expelled myself from theatre by expelling theatre from myself – the vestigial organ is proof that that process has been completed.

My own gesture was radical and perhaps imprudent. But there is always the monks' way, which you have suggested. Training daily in the art of dying – dying every day a little bit more as a theatre-maker. Slowly, slowly, the theatre organ dries out, atrophies and becomes a vestigial organ. Peeping through the hole (in our extended conscience), from both sides, one can see the non-human performing: birds dancing, worms turning, orangutangs acting in tragedies, crocodiles yawning, rocks cracking, leaves changing their color. From the other side, the non-human looks through us. The multi-faceted spirit can travel freely between the makeshift stage and ourselves via the metaphorical (bullet) hole.

ME: Thank you, Treplev!

16 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull in a version by Christopher Hampton,* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 82.

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TREPLEV: Will you be able to understand all that and enact it? No? It means that you're not ready for the future. Yes? That means that you too have performed the all too necessary self-surgery and have eliminated the final conundrum of theatre. Yes, that's right, the unsurpassable fourth wall was always you! You have now stopped the boomerang from coming back and have managed to expel the human from the theatre.

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III. New Subjectivity

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Katarzyna Moszczyńska-Dürst (University of Warsaw)

Life lines: mourning, agency and subjectivity in Argentine auto(bio)graphical novels*

Abstract
The proliferation of mourning life-writing in the Argentine literary system might be conceived first and foremost as a response to the prevailing need to submit to loss and to the work of mourning; this chapter analyses narrative mechanisms and the political dimension of those autonarratives, with a focus on the mourning / melancholia dialectic. It argues that the analysed auto(bio)graphical novels offer a political and ethical reflection on vulnerability, subjectivity and agency since they question the contemporary "promise of happiness" and "the good life" paradigms that Lauren Berlant conceives as "cruel optimism."
Keywords: mourning, agency, subjectivity, family, the promise of happiness

Mourning is an essential healing process that involves a gradual acceptance of the loss suffered; after losing someone or something significant, whether a person, a community or a place with which we have identified ourselves, we lose a fundamental part of our identity. Hence, what causes suffering is not only the loss itself but the experienced incapacity to define ourselves without the existence of what has been lost.[1] In other words, when we are in mourning, we mourn for someone or something that has taken "a little bit" of ourselves.[2] Thus, mourning as a psychic process sheds light on our vulnerability created by emotional ties that bind us to other subjects and other agencies in ways that sometimes escape our understanding or will:

> one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. […] mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation

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1 Alexandra Kohan, *Un cuerpo al fin* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2022), 229.

2 Jean Allouch, "Erotics of mourning in the time of dry death", in *Invention in the real: Papers of the Freudian School of Melbourne*, ed. Linda Clifton (London: Routledge, 2018), 245–62.

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> […] the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.[3]

As Freud argues in his famous essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, written in 1915 and published in 1917,[4] mourning and melancholia are reactions to the loss of a "love object," i. e., the loss of a person, the loss of an ideal—one's country, political ideal, liberty, nature marked by destruction, etc. Both mourning and melancholia share a set of distinguishing features, such as a painful rejection of the outside world, loss of the capacity to love others or the cessation of all activities. However, there are two traits that differentiate these conditions: the disturbance of self-esteem and the unconscious character of loss—elements characteristic of melancholia—are absent in mourning. The father of psychoanalysis argues that when we refuse to submit to the object loss, when we fail to mourn for it and rebel against loss by repressing it, we succumb to melancholia conceived as a pathological internalisation of the lost object: "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object."[5] Melancholia arises as the ego, instead of working through the painful process of grief and eventually withdrawing the attachment, forms an identification with the lost love object without being aware of it: "the object is not only lost, but that loss itself is lost, withdrawn and preserved in the suspended time of psychic life."[6] The ungrieved —or ungrievable loss—becomes a part of our psychic mechanism and provokes what we today refer to as clinical depression: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."[7] Whereas in some subjects the same experience of loss might produce a feeling of melancholia instead of mourning, others suffer from melancholia as a result of unresolved, prolonged or sabotaged grief, making it a possible horizon of every work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit).*

The Argentinean auto(bio)graphic writings read dialogically in this chapter: Inés Acevedo's *A Brilliant Idea* (*Una idea genial*, 2008), Mauro Libertella's *My Buried Book* (*Mi libro enterrado*, 2014), Daniel Guebel's *The Jewish Son* (*El hijo judío*, 2018), Paula Vázquez's *The Stars* (*Las estrellas*, 2019), Ana Navajas' *You*

3 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 20.
4 Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 237–258.
5 Ibid, 246.
6 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 183.
7 Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 246.

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Are Very Quiet Today (*Estás muy callada hoy*, 2019), Paula Mariasch's *Black Almost Blue* (*Negro casi azul*, 2021) and Marina Mariasch's *Personal Effects* (*Efectos personales*, 2022) come from an in-between period of time, suspended between the life and death of a father or a mother. Although all narrators strive to reconstruct their memories and work through mourning, each of them does so in a singular, incomparable way. It would be impossible, as Roland Barthes observes in his own *Mourning Diary*,[8] to compare or describe the grade or intensity of narratives of grief; this chapter aims at reflecting on the narrative mechanisms, (po)ethics and political dimension of the analysed autonarratives, focusing on the mourning / melancholia dialectic. Although mourning and melancholia seem privatizing, isolating, solitary, or even apolitical, I argue that grief encoded in those texts offers a political and ethical reflection on vulnerability, subjectivity and agency. Life- and memory-narratives in general, and mourning autonarrations in particular, are co-responsible for the establishment of values, attitudes and margins of visibility, as well as subjectivity itself. As noted by Lauren Berlant, the traditional "genre of the life" used to offer the most destructive and conventionalized forms of social normativity: "when norms feel like laws, they constitute a social set of the rules for belonging […] whose narrowness threatens people's capacity to invent ways to attach to the world."[9] However, new non-normative life-writing provides the readers with insights on how other people have lived and died, showing a wide range of life-scripts that question the hegemonic "promise of happiness"[10] that Berlant conceives as "cruel optimism."[11]

Hector Libertella, a famous Argentinian author, died in 2006. In 2010 his son Mauro started to write his first literary text, an autobiographical novel reconstructing the final days of his father as well as the key moments in their father-

8 Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

9 Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: a Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *Biography* 34 (2011), no. 1: 180–89, 182.

10 Sara Ahmed points to the performative character and ideological value of "the promise of happiness" rooted in the social imaginary: "The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things. Happiness shapes what coheres as a world" (Sara Ahmed, *The Promise*, 2). The thinker aims at analysing the ways in which in contemporary societies happiness is associated with certain ways of seeing and living in the world that function as "scripts" of normative behavior. According to Ahmed, when one pursues happiness, one desires everything that is related to the above-mentioned scripts of the "good" life, desired by the majority in the name of happiness and life itself.

11 "A relation of cruel optimism," argues Lauren Berlant, "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1).

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son relationship. *My Buried Book* is at the same time a mourning life-narrative, an homage paid to his father and a metatextual book about acquiring critical agency in dialogue with the lost love-object: "My father died four years ago, on an October day at noon, in his two-room flat where I now live"; Mauro recalls, and adds, almost in a reverential tone—"It was an instant at the same time gentle and dramatic: me kneeling on the floor, him lying on his bed, unconscious for hours,"[12] creating a figuration that alludes to religious imaginary. Thus, the book begins at the most painful moment of death and immediately afterwards evokes the diagnosis the narrator heard two months before in hospital; it is at that moment that the narrator realises for the first time that his father is going to die soon and is unable to control his bodily reactions in order to conceal them from his father: "I went to the toilet, burst shortly into tears, washed my face and walked back down the long corridor to where he was waiting for me."[13]

The work of mourning is mixed with reflections on Hector Libertella's book *The Ghost's Architecture* (*La arquitectura del fantasma*), published a few days after the author's death. Mauro wonders whether his father intuitively knew that he had cancer since he wrote his last text with a kind of urgency that from today's perspective seems more than revealing; hence, in the narrator's view, *The Ghost's Architecture* should not only be analysed as a piece of life writing, but rather as a text about the anticipation of death and a spiritual exercise in mourning that the son, on re-reading it, makes his own. At this moment in his life, the narrator, in accordance with the diagnosis offered by Freud, is not interested in anything that is not directly related to the memory or the figure of his father; he is able to take an interest in the outside world only if it is directly related to Hector's life or work. He reminisces about shared moments, frequents his father's favourite bars, re-reads his texts or meets his friends to listen to anecdotes related to his literary career and his bohemian lifestyle.

Speaking in psychoanalytic terms, the book codifies foundational scenes in the process of the idealisation of Hector Libertella: Mauro remembers, for example, how his father read Borges' short story "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" to him when he was merely ten years old; moreover, he reconstructs the mixed feelings of shame and anticipation he felt when he was waiting for his father's opinions on his journalistic texts. The readers can also observe the narrator's failed attempts at identification with the father that result in a lowered

12 Mauro Libertella, *Mi libro enterrado* (Buenos Aires: Mansalva, 2014), 7. Original: "Mi padre murió hace cuatro años, un mediodía de octubre, en su departamento de dos ambientes en el que ahora vivo yo" / "Fue un instante al mismo tiempo suave y dramático: yo arrodillado en el piso, él acostado en su cama, inconsciente hacía horas" (Ibid., 7). Translations from Spanish to English are by the author.

13 Ibid., 7. Original: "Fui al baño, descargué un llanto en ráfagas cortas, me lavé la cara y atravesé de nuevo el largo pasillo hasta donde él me esperaba." (Ibid., 7)

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self-esteem expressed by the feeling, among others, of not deserving the surname he bears; "Libertella", apart from being linked to his father's artistic creation, is of mythical character: "He once said: *Etymologically, Libertella means book for the earth. That is the book I water every day.* When someone says, *Hi, Libertella*, it seems to me that they are talking to my old man."[14] In line with this assumption, the autobiographical self highlights the things that the father could be proud of at the age of twenty-three: his first novel and symbolic and economic recognition, as well as a trip around the world. He notes later on: "I had already reached this age, and had nothing […] at 23 he had his first novel and I had his death."[15] As one can easily observe, the book frequently resorts to both direct quotations, with Héctor Libertella's comments graphically marked in the text, and indirect ones, such as comments on *The Ghost's Architecture*. Mauro reveals an urgent desire to repeat the words of his father so as to cherish his memory through writing, and yet is also marked by fear of not being able to remember him and quote correctly. The narrator seems torn, as Derrida was when writing his homage for Roland Barthes, between the need to identify with the deceased, to write for him and in his name so as "to make him present and faithfully to represent him,"[16] and the fear of "two infidelities,"[17] achieved either by disfiguring his words or by remaining silent and thus making his death more tangible.

In turn, Paula Vázquez (1984), a lawyer, poet and librarian, started to write a diary during the cancer treatment of her mother. It served as a point of departure for her first autobiographical novel, published in 2019 after her mother's death. *The Stars* is a mourning autonarrative combined with a travel journal and symptomatic reflection on family relations marked by loss and melancholia. "So I write about my mother and about my mother's death and about my own loneliness […]. I moved away from everything to try to get closer, once again, to my mother"[18]—says Paula Vázquez to underline the physical and psychological distance she needed to face her own sense of orphanhood. She realises that we all have to go through this liminal experience, knowing that it does not help to make it any less traumatic. Further, the narrator claims she needs to mourn not only for the death of her mother, but also for her mother's body affected by cancer and all kinds of suffering, including two spinal operations and the kind of pain that the

14 Ibid., 60. Original: "Alguna vez él dijo: Etimológicamente, Libertella quiere decir libro para la tierra. Ese es el libro que riego todos los días. Cuando alguien me dice che, Libertella, me parece que le están hablando a mi viejo." (Ibid., 60)

15 Ibid., 44–45. Original: "Ya ya había llegado a esta edad, y nada […] a los 23 él tuvo su primera novela y yo tuve su muerte." (Ibid., 44–45)

16 Jacques Derrida, *The work of mourning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 38.

17 Ibid., 45.

18 Paula Vázquez, *Las estrellas* (Madrid: Editorial Transito, 2020), 17. Original: "Escribo entonces sobre mi mamá y sobre la muerte de mi mamá y sobre mi propia soledad. […] Me alejé de todo para tratar de acercarme, una vez más, a mi mamá." (Ibid., 17)

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narrator does not hesitate to describe as "unbearable." It becomes clear that the mourning for her mother's death and illness entails mourning for her life since "(her) mother became ill six months after the death of (her) grandmother, her own mother, whom she devoted herself to, […] having taken care of her for the last seventeen years."[19]

However, the text seems to suggest that Paula lost her love object much earlier; in fact, she did not accompany her mother since the onset of the illness, but did so solely for the last four months of her life. In one of the key moments of the book, the narrator recounts a conversation in which she commits herself to try to "repair" the relationship and to strengthen the bond. She begins her speech by stressing that since she moved away from home, i. e., for the last fifteen years, they have not been able to share anything meaningful. Further, the auto-(bio)graphic subject wonders what will remain of her mother's and grandmother's lives; she also explains that she writes in order to heal a part of herself that has remained unattainable to her even through analytical sessions so as to try to acquire agency by writing what she otherwise feels unable to say. In psychoanalytic terms, one could therefore claim that the narrator tries to work through the loss of the maternal function, which might have occurred long before the actual death of the mother.

Daniel Guebel (1956), a renowned writer, journalist and scriptwriter, published an autobiographical novel *The Jewish Son* in 2018; in this autonarration he codifies his father facing an imminent death, weakened by treatments, surgeries and sedatives. Under those dramatic circumstances, the narrator evokes his complicated childhood, focusing on a relationship with his father as a soon-to-be-lost love object. Later on, as an adult orphan, he invokes his father to mourn for him and to make him survive through the act of writing: "Father. I wrote these pages, which unveil you and conceal you, so that you might somehow survive."[20] At the same time, however, when faced with the illness and death of his father, the narrator raises a provocative question: "What can one say about a father?,"[21] only to provide us with a futile attempt to find answers to this dilemma by means of citing his father's most significant tastes and hobbies. Therefore, the readers learn that Daniel's father liked dancing tango, wearing fine moustaches, playing roulette, falling platonically in love with intellectual women and "making the revolution" without the dogmatism of the Party.

Ana Navajas (1974), a journalist and a self-declared "housewife," debuted in 2019 with *You Are Very Quiet Today*, an autobiographical novel, which combines

19 Ibid., 16.

20 Daniel Guebel, *El hijo judío* (Madrid: De Conatus, 2020), 149. Original: "Padre. Escribí estas páginas, que te descubren y te velan, para que sobrevivas de alguna manera." (Ibid., 149)

21 Ibid., 83. Original: "¿Qué se puede decir de un padre?." (Ibid., 83)

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a mourning auto-narrative with a maternity journal and reflection on gender roles. It begins with the recollection of the death of Ana's mother, who passed away after suffering from a cancer that the narrator describes as "atrocious"; in the opening passage Ana, together with her siblings, decides not to fulfil her mother's last wish, as cremation would delay the burial by three days. Her life-writing codifies different ways in which the family tries—unsuccessfully—to cope with the loss, stressing the difficulties they face while mourning: "We talk about our mother, in a natural tone, as if she was not dead. We intersperse common memories with venomous phrases, relating what we did today or yesterday. Dad takes off his glasses, wipes away a tear that slips quietly and clarifies: I'm not crying […]. One of my brothers makes fun. Another laughs. So do I. We are six perverse, proud, desolate orphans."[22] Likewise, black humour seems to be the tool that allows the narrator to recreate the last moments of the mother's life and to underline the incapacity experienced by the whole family to talk to the sick woman about her imminent death: "Nobody wanted to talk to her about her death, it was not a good subject […]. It is recommended to think positively."[23] As one might observe in the citation above, the relatives codified in Navajas' self-narrative resort to humour, laughter and mockery in order to avoid facing the loss of the love object, to deny the absence of the mother and to avoid *das Unheimliche* that has interrupted their life trajectories, recreating a supposedly familiar, everyday atmosphere of their existence. This symptomatic writing marks the whole autonarrative that reconstructs six years of Navajas' family, suggesting that in this case the loss has never been properly mourned; the mother's bedroom, preserved as if her absence was not definitive, is but one of the most striking symptoms of the phenomenon in question: "It's been five years since my mother died. Her wardrobe is still intact. So is her bedside table and dressing table, furnished with creams, make-up and perfumes."[24]

I(nés) Acevedo (1983)—a writer and, since 2018, a transgender activist—portrays herself in her first (autobiographical) novel, published in 2010, as a 25-year-old adult orphan who tries—unsuccessfully and without hope—to go through the grief so as not to get sick again on the anniversary of her father's death:

22 Ana Navajas, *Estás muy callada hoy* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2022), 19. Original: "hablamos de mamá, con naturalidad, como si no estuviera muerta. Intercalamos recuerdos comunes con frases venenosas, y con lo que hicimos hoy o ayer. Papá se saca los anteojos, se seca una lágrima que resbala callada y aclara: no estoy llorando. […] Uno de mis hermanos se burla. Otro se ríe. Yo también. Somos seis huérfanos perversos, soberbios, desolados." (Ibid., 19)

23 Ibid., 15. Original: "Nadie quería hablar de su muerte con ella, no era un buen tema […] kropka przed czy po? Está bien visto pensar en positivo." (Ibid., 15)

24 Ibid., 96. Original: "Ya van cinco años desde que se murió mi mamá. Su ropero sigue intacto. También su mesa de luz y el tocador con cremas, maquillaje y perfumes." (Ibid., 96)

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> I had my reasons for suspecting that the anniversary might kill me. In the first year after my father died, I suffered from clinical depression. Once on the bus, in the middle of winter, I found myself opening the window. A man asked me to close it, it was cold. I can't breathe, I replied. I didn't really want to breathe, that's why I opened the window so that the air would come in by inertia and I wouldn't have to make the effort. I lacked energy.[25]

Throughout the text, the narrator defends herself with the use of irony in the face of the ineffability of death and the sensation of a tragic destiny, apparently inscribed in her family heritage, which is nothing but an internalised and ungrievable loss; the readers never learn how or why Inés' parents died as the causes of their deaths are encoded in the text as the unspeakable traumata. The work of mourning over the loss of her parents as primary love-objects fails repeatedly as if it was conceived as a betrayal; it becomes a part of the narrator's psychic apparatus. For a melancholic, as Sara Ahmed argues, "suffering becomes a way of holding on to a lost object."[26] At this point of narration, she seems incapable of facing and mourning the loss, of stating what exactly was lost or transcending it.

The book in general, and the above passage in particular, might be analysed as an accurate codification of the melancholic condition that does not allow the narrator to lead a healthy, functional life, bringing her to the brink of illness, depression and suicide. As Freud argues, one of the most striking features of melacholia, provoked by unresolved grief, is a death wish. Throughout the text, the narrator struggles to accomplish the work of mourning and to sever the ties that bond her with the loss; and yet she seems fixated on her family's history, revealing her narcissistic ego, typical of melancholia. Hence, when the narrator bumps into a mirror or analyses—with an impulse of self-love or hateful scrutiny—her own image reflected in a mirror, she seems to confirm Lacan's perspective on the melancholiac's narcissism and misrecognition: "the melancholiac necessarily passes through, as if it were, his own image. Initially he attacks this image so as to reach, with it, the object […] whose control escapes him and whose collapse will drag him into the suicide-rush."[27] However, the narrative also codifies, on occasions, outbursts of joy—or mania in Freudian or Lacanian terms

25 Inés Acevedo, *Una idea genial* (Barcelona: Ediciones Alpha Decay, 2012), 18. Original: "Yo había tenido mis razones para sospechar que el aniversario me podía fulminar. Durante el primer año después de que murió mi papá, sufrí depresiones físicas. Una vez en el colectivo, en pleno invierno, me encontré abriendo la ventanilla. Un señor me pidió que la cerrara, que hacía frío. No puedo respirar, le respondí. En realidad no quería respirar, por eso abría la ventana para que el aire entrara por inercia y yo no tuviera que hacer el esfuerzo. Me faltaba energía." (Ibid., 18)

26 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 142.

27 Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety. The Seminar, Book X, 1962–1963* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Cambridge: the Polity Press, 2014), 335.

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—that might seem paradoxical, but, from a psychoanalytical perspective, are strictly related to melancholia, forging the same "mania/melancholia cycle."[28]

Paula Mariasch (1977), an architect who entered the literary scene in 2021, portrays herself in her first autobiographical novelle *Black Almost Blue* as a classical melancholic figure. She resorts to melodrama, as she declares to be overwhelmed by depression and describes in detail the medication she takes so as to deal with her disorder: antidepressants, anxiolytics and homeopathic drops. We understand, as the reading public, that her condition is largely due to an unfinished mourning, provoked by the loss—never properly mourned—of her mother, who committed suicide 13 years ago, an event that the autobiographical subject seems to have experienced as a great "betrayal." The narrator locks herself in her room "to cry and to think of (her) mother's body in free fall"[29]; she cannot stop reading her mother's farewell letter or reconstructing the last family meeting. Paula recalls the scenes of the burial or the religious rites of mourning typical of the Jewish tradition, which, however, did not bring her any substantial relief. She also tries to recreate the precise moment when she received the news about the suicide to comment on how: "one minute can change your personality forever, and you think about it while you look at yourself in the mirror, pale […] while there is nothing left."[30]

Marina Mariasch (1973), a writer, translator and journalist (and Paula Mariasch's sister), published an autobiographical novel entitled *Personal Effects* in 2022. The narrator also tries to work through the grief provoked by her mother's suicide, which "is not like normal death if there is anything normal about death."[31] At the beginning of her text, she ridicules self-help books, focusing on the schematic mourning steps they prescribe: "denial, anger, negotiation, depression, acceptance" so as to provide the readers with an alternative description of the process: "skein, swarm, madness, anger, guilt, shame, death metal, limbo, party […], hate, disgust, taste of rusty nails."[32] The narrator seems to warn us about the danger of perceiving the mourning process as a task to be accomplished according to easily established and prescribed stages.[33] The narrator thinks of the noise the body makes when it hits the ground, of the failed attempts to deny the

28 Ibid., 336.

29 Paula Mariasch, *Negro casi azul* (Buenos Aires: Vinilo Editora, 2021), 65. Original: "a llorar y a pensar en el cuerpo de (su) mamá en caída libre." (Ibid., 65)

30 Ibid., 26. Original: "en un minuto puede cambiar para siempre tu personalidad y lo pensás mientras te mirás al espejo, pálida […] no queda nada." (Ibid., 26)

31 Marina Mariasch, *Efectos personales* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2022), 15. Original: "no es como la muerte normal si hay algo normal en la muerte." (Ibid., 15)

32 Ibid., 15. Original: "negación, ira, negociación, depresión, aceptación" (15) /"madeja, enjambre, locura, bronca, culpa, vergüenza, death metal, limbo, fiesta […], odio, asco, gusto a clavos oxidados." (Ibid., 15)

33 Vid. Kohan, *Un cuerpo al fin*, 231.

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tragedy observed in her father's behaviour, determined to maintain the usual rhythm of life. Marina recreates the most traumatic moments linked to her mother's death, such as the delivery of her posthumous letters and personal belongings at the police station, the funeral rites typical of the Jewish religion and the last family meetings, as well as the bodily reactions shared with Paula. Further, the narrator attends the meetings organised by the Circle of suicide-bereaved families, whose members would talk not only about "pills, shackles on the wrists, the train tracks," but also about ways of dealing with the tragedy, about "their methods, their anaesthetics, their lifelines."[34]

Thus, the spectral character of these texts resides in the fluctuations between mourning and the melancholic conditions that mark the autobiographical subjects' individual and collective experiences; while those autonarrations record the imperative of going through a necessary mourning in order to avoid being forever attached to the lost love object, at the same time, the writing itself bears witness to the life of dead parents and does not let them fall into oblivion. The desire to mourn through life writing inscribed in those texts might be a symbolic solution to grief provoked by the loss of a love-object and, at the same time, a way of clinging to the attachment. According to Derrida, the work of mourning always includes melancholia, and we are always immersed in mourning—be it high or partial mourning—and fighting it.[35]

In this line of thought, the analysed life-writing points to a continuum between mourning and melancholia that shows an unresolved dialectic between the need for the work of mourning, encoded in life-narratives, and clinging to the loss that does not allow for a full emotional closure. In the words of Gana, mourning is a highly transformational experience of "being stranded somewhere along a continuum or inside an unresolved chiastic oscillation between mourning and melancholia or between the demand for consolation and the insistence of inconsolability."[36] This unresolved continuum—or ambivalence, in Melanie Klein's terms—resulting from a need for preservation and annihilation of the lost love object[37] lies at the very foundation of the poetics of narrative mourning.

Moreover, these novels of mourning and melancholia neither merely codify the loss of the love object nor solely recreate attempts to submit to it or to avoid it, revealing the transformation the loss brings. Paraphrasing Judith Butler, I argue that the grief encoded in those texts provides the readers with a sense of ethical and political community by highlighting the common aspects of our embodied

34 Mariasch, *Efectos personales*, 32. Original: "pastillas, gilletes en las muñecas, las vías del tren"/ "sus métodos, sus anestesias, sus salvavidas," (Ibid., 32)

35 Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 53–55.

36 Nouri Gana, *Signifying Loss* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 46.

37 Melanie Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" (in The Selected Melanie Klein, London: Penguin, 1986), 115–46.

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and embedded existence, showing our relational ties and profound dependency on others and invoking ethical responsibility.[38] Confronted with the aftermaths of the father's or mother's death, the auto(bio)graphic subjects do not allow themselves to be seduced by the processes of identification and idealisation, but rather resort to the political dimension of mourning and vulnerability, seeking their agency in the creation of a counter-archive of memory that deconstructs the performative "promise of happiness" that has permeated each of their individual and collective histories. The turn towards embodied and politically involved life-narratives, observed in Argentina, points to the political entanglement of aesthetics and the aesthetic dimension of politics, which confirms the hypothesis formulated by Linda Anderson. According to the scholar, auto(bio)graphical practices might be both "a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through his/her cultural inscription and recognition."[39]

Thus, while Mauro Libertella professes a deep love and an almost paralysing admiration for the work of Héctor Libertella, he also recalls the progressive deterioration of his father's body, caused by the effects of chronic alcoholism. At the beginning of *My Buried Book* the narrator confesses: "He never told me about it, but it was obvious that he had already decided to start facing his last years locked up, almost penniless, smoking and drinking incredible quantities of alcohol […] he knew that he would not be able to bear the ravages of that routine for many years. That is why it is legitimate to think that he was dying little by little, consciously, as a choice."[40] Later on, he compares photos from the family album from 1998 and 2002 to record with vertigo how his father changed in just four years; he also compares the deterioration of the place where Héctor Libertella lived to what was happening to his body, which involved nothing but decadence, abandonment and destruction. One of the aims of this incarnated memory writing is to demystify the figure of the bohemian writer as well as the role attributed to addiction in the artist's life and in the cultural field. The narrator thus rejects "the grammar of idealisation" produced by the beatnik influence, which presented bohemian alcoholics as the last rebels, children of a revolutionary era, endowed with a freedom and ingenuity that are supposedly no longer within our reach: "that fallacy was not strong enough to stand on its own. When I saw him trembling or with his legs so swollen that he found it hard to get out of his

38 Vid. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

39 Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Routledge, 2011), 20.

40 Libertella, *Mi libro enterrado*, 14. Original: "Nunca me lo dijo, pero era obvio que ya había decidido empezar a encarar sus últimos años encerrado, casi sin dinero, fumando y tomando cantidades increíbles de alcohol […] sabía que no soportaría por muchos años los embates de esa rutina. Por eso es lícito pensar que se fue muriendo de a poco, a conciencia, como una elección." (Ibid., 14)

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chair, San Francisco, City Lights, Allen Ginsberg and the whole beatnik constellation would fall apart."[41]

The autonarrative produced by Daniel Guebel—the "jewish son"—is even more subversive in relation to the hegemonic ideal of the bourgeois nuclear family. Daniel, a renowned writer of Jewish origin, not only tries to submit to the loss caused by his father's illness and death, but also faces traumatic memories of domestic violence. He recalls how his father would look up to the sky to express his disapproval of his son's—always erroneous—behaviour, how he would slowly undo his belt, and say: "come here." And before administering the first blow of his usual punishments, he would pronounce a phrase that remained engraved like an enigma in his son's memory. He would always say: "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you."[42] Thus, the incomplete work of mourning for the father's death is mixed and strengthened in this auto-narrative with the love-hate ambivalence of the melancholic impulse produced by his ungrieved childhood; this life-narrative is therefore an attempt of submission to mourning for the family that did not know how to be happy or protect the little ones from pain. This autonarration does not codify an involuntary return of a repressed, traumatic event, but rather the deliberate work of mourning; and it is primarily a book about our constitutional bodily vulnerability, highlighted by the codifications of the aging and ill body on the one hand and the hurting body of the child that cannot escape violence on the other. Thus, the body as encoded in life-writing of mourning and melancholia points to "mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence."[43]

Inés Acevedo's memories, reinscribed in *A Brilliant Idea*, recreate a family life, which also contradicts the normative "promise of happiness." The narrator evokes the mechanisms of exclusion and estrangement that have permeated her family's life for generations. Her parents, a married couple with four children and limited economic resources, lived off the rent of twenty-seven hectares without ever ceasing to be poor. Inés confesses to having always felt a deep sense of shame caused by the stigma of exclusion, a sense that, despite her mother's insistence, she was never able to overcome. This auto-narrative provides us with a figuration of a precarious life characteristic of the rural areas affected by floods and the crisis of the 1980s.

However, Inés "inherits" exclusion not only from her parents; equally significant in this context is the trajectory of her maternal grandmother, who fled to

41 Ibid., 7. Original: "esa falacia no tuvo fuerza para sostenerse sola. Cuando lo veía temblar o con las piernas tan hinchadas que le costaba levantarse de su silla, San Francisco, City Lights, Allen Ginsberg y toda la constelación beatnik se caían a pedazos." (Ibid., 7)

42 Guebel, *El hijo judío*, 22. Original: "Esto me va a doler a mí más que a vos." (Ibid., 22)

43 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

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Buenos Aires from extreme rural poverty and a family life shared with fourteen siblings only to become a maid and a victim of sexual abuse, forced to send her two "illegitimate" daughters to a convent. The grandmother never revealed the identity of her daughters' fathers, nor did she have an emotional bond with the girls until they began to live and work with her as teenagers. Acevedo's life-writing codifies not only poverty and exclusion, but also the foreclosed scenes of gendered violence and abuse, taking the form of a symptom of an unlocatable, ungrievable loss that has marked her matrilineal genealogy. Bearing witness to the untold family history with focus on bodily vulnerability and sexual violence perpetrated by unnamed, white men of the upper classes must take place within the oscillation between mourning and melancholia, allowing her to acquire new insights and agency.

Likewise, none of the family figurations produced by the Mariasch sisters are in line with the ideal of happiness. Both texts relate the painful aftermath of their parents' divorce and the communication difficulties that mark their family relationships as well as the depressive and borderline disorders with which they were diagnosed. Among the emotions recounted by Marina Mariasch and codified in *Personal Effects* shame occupies a prominent place and is provoked by the stigma of madness and the fear that "nobody would love her with a suicidal mother,"[44] especially given that it was not a political act but an "anonymous suicide" induced by a failed love affair. With a marked dose of irony and a clear social conscience, Marina Mariasch inscribes her mother in the romantic and bourgeois tradition, portraying her in terms of a representative of the upper-middle class, who after her tragic death becomes a "Karenina without a lover."[45]

Paula Mariasch, in turn, apart from recounting her depressive condition, provides us with an autonarration centred on the maternal function: the mother's suicide is but an oblique reflection of the pregnancy losses suffered by Paula in her successive, futile attempts to become a mother herself. In fact, the two events are bound together as the driving force behind this embodied practice of life-writing: "I feel pregnant, I have dark circles under my eyes. My whole body aches and I'm tired […]. There is tension in every millimetre of my body, pure uncertainty. Thirteen years ago my mother committed suicide" / "Today I killed another baby."[46] The narrator is convinced that her emotional life must also lead to disaster: she relates only to men who are afraid to forge a more lasting bond; in fact, the boyfriend with whom she had the longest relationship did not want to

44 Mariasch, *Efectos personales*, 30. Original: "nadie (la) iba a querer con una madre suicida." (Ibid., 30)

45 Ibid., 31. Original: "Karenina sin amante." (Ibid., 31)

46 Mariasch, *Negro casi azul*, 9, 15. Original: "Me siento embarazada, tengo ojeras. Me duele todo el cuerpo y estoy cansada […] Hay tensión en cada milímetro de mi cuerpo, pura incertidumbre. Hace trece años se suicidó mi mamá" (Ibid., 9) "Hoy maté otro bebé." (Ibid., 15)

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live together, create a family, or even go on a trip together. When Paula falls in love with Sow, an undocumented African migrant, and decides to marry him so that he can stay in the country, she is forced to contrast her way of life with that of people from developing countries. It is due to this encounter that she becomes aware of the class privilege that, up to that moment, is inscribed in the text as the unspoken and that gains force at the end of the text, once it is materialized in the following critical remark offered by Sow: "You have everything, I don't understand why you are so anxious […]. I would like to be able to help my mum when she needs it, have a place to sleep and that's it. I'm used to living like this."[47] One might say, in Judith Butler's terms, that Sow, preoccupied with the health and safety of his relatives trying to arrive in Europe, confronts Paula with a vital question encoded in migrant narratives, i.e., asking whose bodies and lives matter, and to whom, to the extent that they are considered valuable and grievable: "An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all,"[48]

In *You Are Very Quiet Today*, Ana Navajas recreates the death of her mother as a major milestone in her life trajectory. We learn that after this painful loss Ana changes her life completely—she leaves her job so as to concentrate solely on becoming a perfect mother to her three children ("The only thing I was going to be from then on was a mother, the best mother").[49] By means of a critical elaboration of family memories, with an emphasis on the maternal function, the narrator confronts her readers with a fundamental question: how is it possible that even educated and middle-class women decide, out of their "free volition" to renounce their own agency, to think of themselves as if they existed for the sake of others, as if they had no voice,[50], and as if nothing had changed for decades? In this line of thought, Navajas's life-writing that covers the span of six years offers a critical reflection on the feudal character of the "heterosexual social contract"[51] still in force in the 21st century, which is based, as before, on the sexual difference and the female sacrifice that is never fully recognised nor mourned over; this contract, partially unconscious, disguises the sacrifice with the ideal of love, and still obliges daughters to venerate the sacrifice of their mothers without ever acknowledging the losses they suffered, to devote themselves primarily to the

47 Ibid., 63. Original: "Vos tenés todo, no entiendo por qué te angustias tanto. […] Me gustaría poder ayudar a mi mamá cuando lo necesita, dónde dormir y ya está. Yo estoy acostumbrado a vivir así." (Ibid., 63)

48 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London New York: Verso, 2009), 38.

49 Ana Navajas, *Estás muy callada hoy* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2022), 149. Original: "convertir(se) en madre. Lo único que iba a ser de ahí en más era madre, la mejor madre." (Ibid., 149)

50 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press).

51 Monique Wittig, "The straight mind" (Feminist issues. 1, 1980), 103–10.

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care of others—of their children, husbands or aging parents—and to "be for the other" at the expense of melancholia. Thus, the analysed autonarration is marked at the beginning by melancholia, triggered by forming an identification with the lost mother function. Ana becomes her mother, as the melancholic incorporation of the lost love object within the ego takes place when the ego "assumes the features of object."[52] Nevertheless, at the end the text resorts to mourning over the mother's death and her life devoted primarily to caring for others and to putting her husband on a "pedestal"; the mourning/melancholia oscillation allows for an effective critique on family roles and models. While transitioning toward a mourning position, the narrator tries to reconstruct her identity narrative not as a mother, but as a relational subject that cares for her community and society. As a result of this transformation, Ana decides to separate from her husband, start a PhD thesis on feminism, write a book, and, as highlighted by the closing remarks of the text, is finally able to tell her homeopath "what she felt when her mother died."[53]

Cesar Aira claims that Argentine autobiographical novels are trivial texts of little literary and human value since their authors, "absolutely content and satisfied with their lives," "resort to three basic stereotypical conflicts: […] my old man died, my girlfriend left me or I got a pimple." (Aira)[54] In contrast to Aira's judgment, I argue that life- and memory-writing operates by means of latent cultural processes; this kind of writing is co-responsible for the establishment of values, attitudes and margins of visibility; it also contributes to the definition of subjectivity and agency themselves. In conclusion, the analysed life-writing re-inscribes a wide range of literary configurations of mourning and melancholia, shedding new light on the work of mourning and the mechanisms of exclusion. The corpus identifies the continuum of loss, mourning and melancholia and their remainders in bodily life and memory writing, using literary strategies that challenge the cultural ideal of the subject created in the Anthropocene. Thus, both mourning and melancholia are (con)fused, challenging their seemingly oppositional and apolitical character. The narrators of life and memory-writing analysed in this chapter seem to warn us that the process of mourning can be so unmanageable as to interrupt and render unreadable our narratives consciously constructed over a lifetime, challenging or crumbling our image as autonomous subjects. The autonarratives suggest that the work of mourning concludes when one accepts not only the loss, but also the transformation it entails, that is, when one is able to "submit" to the loss one has suffered and mourned.

52 Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 237–58.

53 Navajas, *Estás muy callada hoy*, 190. Original: "que sintió cuando se murió su madre." (Ibid., 190)

54 Original: "absolutamente contentos y satisfechos con sus vidas," "recurren a tres conflictos estereotipados básicos: […] murió mi viejo, me dejó mi novia o me salió un grano." (Aira)

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On a more symbolic level, one must bear in mind that autobiographical literature in Argentina was shaped by traumatic historical events, which are still present in the collective memory and the agenda of political movements. The studied corpus might therefore also point to the desire deeply rooted in the Argentine social imaginary that marked the whole generation of the "children of the dictatorship," the generation of writers born in the 1970s and 80s; this is a desire to mourn properly for those parents who "were disappeared" during the dictatorial regime and whose bodies were never properly recovered and buried. The melancholic, adult orphan might therefore be conceived as a figure that incarnates an Argentine society that, as a community, has not yet done the work of mourning and continues to refuse to accept its "ungrieved" wounds and losses, "freezing" them in its collective unconscious. The collective grief and the work of mourning require the bodies that have been lost; otherwise, there will be no end to the processing of the loss of the love objects and a collective, public melancholia will never cease.[55]

Moreover, these self-narratives question the hegemonic cultural logic and the traditional model of the family, as well as the intentionality that moves the members of the portrayed families towards certain vital objectives in order to offer an emotional, ethical and political evaluation of certain choices and modes of behavior. The autobiographical subjects address the question of the loss of a parent as a primary love object and critically reopen the childhood years and family genealogies and family myths to an ideological rearticulation from a present perspective. In this line of thought, the mourning and melancholia autonarrations show us ways in which happiness is associated with certain families, or even with certain ways of seeing and living in the world that function as "scripts" of patriarchal behaviour. In this sense, autobiographical subjects criticise the pursuit of normative happiness that relates to the scripts of the "good"[56] life, desirable and desired by the majority of society in the name of happiness and life itself.

Hence, the mourning autonarratives explore the territory excluded from the patriarchal discourse of unitary, rational subjectivity by evoking absences, losses, anxiety, illness, insanity and vulnerability, i.e., by questioning the very ideal of

55 During the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983), Argentine citizens experienced severe repressions and terror. The military and security forces were actively involved in abducting political opponents; the surpression of dissidents of the dictatorship led to the disappearance of about 30,000 people, called desaparecidos ("the disappeared"). In 1995, a new socio-political organization was created that proved to have vital importance for 21st-century auto(bio)graphical literature in Argentina. It is constituted by the children of the *desaparecidos*, ex-political prisoners and exiles during the 1976–1983 dictatorship—HIJOS: Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (CHILDREN. Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, Against Forgetting and Silence).

56 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

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the modern subject shaped in the Anthropocene.[57] According to this ideal, the subject could only become a person by objectifying one part of her- or himself. In other words, to become a fully "human," rational, moral and spiritual being, the modern subject had to abandon his or her "animal," corporeal and collective components, which needed to become repressed and subdued to the "superior" elements of the mind. The critique expressed in their life-writing proceeds from a mental disposition of ambivalence, anger and revolt characteristic of a mourning-melancholia continuum and the full realisation of the vulnerability of our bodies: the self-sufficient, autonomous subject, armoured to avoid contact with the other and to forget his own embodiment and his own precarious life, seems aggressive and delusional when evaluated from the perspective of mourning. The "autobiographical turn"[58] allows us, as Giordano argues, to "appreciate the ways in which the self is eclipsed by life's (and death's) need to manifest itself."[59]

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57 Peter Burger and Christa Burger, *La desaparición del sujeto Una historia de la subjetividad de Montaigne a Blanchot* (Madrid: Akal, 2001).
58 Alberto Giordano, *El giro autobiográfico de la literatura argentina actual* (Buenos Aires: Mansalva, 2009).
59 Ibid. Original: "apreciar los modos en que el yo se eclipsa a favor de lo neutro por la necesidad que tiene la vida de manifestarse."

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"Drops of Experience, complex and interdependent": Re-Thinking Subjectivity and Agency with Alfred North Whitehead[1]

Abstract
This paper argues that Alfred North Whitehead can indeed be considered a critical posthumanist thinker (in fact in many ways). Like critical posthumanist approaches, he outlines a very non-anthropocentric, situated, and process-relational understanding of subjectivity as well as agency. As it is Whitehead's "protest" against what he calls the 'bifurcation of nature' that leads him to his re-conceptualization of subjectivity and agency, I will describe the bifurcation as well as its connection to modern Western theories of subjectivity in the first part of my paper. In the second part, I will introduce Whitehead's concepts of subjectivity and agency, which are fundamentally different from modern theories. In the third and final part of my paper, I will outline some consequences of a non-anthropocentric conception of subjectivity and agency.
Keywords: Alfred North Whitehead, Critical Posthumanism, New Materialism, philosophy of nature, metaphysics

By outlining a radically non-anthropocentric, situated, and process-relational understanding of subjectivity and agency, Alfred North Whitehead can indeed be considered a critical posthumanist thinker. As it is Whitehead's "protest"[2] against what he calls the "bifurcation of nature" that leads him to his "panexperimentalism,"[3] "pan-subjectivism"[4] as well as his pan-agency, I will outline the bifurcation as well as its connection to modern Western theories of subjectivity in the first part of my paper. In the second part, I will introduce

1 This paper is largely based on my book *Tausend Subjekte. Der radikal pluralistische Subjektbegriff im kritischen Posthumanismus und bei A. N. Whitehead*, published in German in 2021.

2 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 30.

3 David Ray Griffin, *Whitehead's radically different postmodern philosophy: an argument for its contemporary relevance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

4 Reiner Wiehl, "Whiteheads Kant-Kritik und Kants Kritik am Panpsychismus," in *Natur, Subjektivität, Gott: Zur Prozessphilosophie Alfred N. Whiteheads*, ed. Helmut Holzhey, Alois Rust and Reiner Wiehl (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1990), my translation.

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Whitehead's concepts of subjectivity and agency, which are fundamentally different from modern theories. In doing so, I hope to show that Whitehead is indeed a critical posthumanist thinker (in fact in many ways). In the third and final part of my paper, I will outline some consequences of a non-anthropocentric conception of subjectivity and agency.

The Bifurcation of Nature or the Exclusion of Subjectivity from Nature

In *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead describes modern Western thought as permeated by a "radical inconsistency."[5] He calls this inner contradiction at the bottom of modern Western thought "the bifurcation of nature." For Whitehead, this fundamental "incoherence"[6] is reflected not only in the concept of nature itself but also in modern theories of subjectivity and agency, as well as in many other areas of experience, such as ethics, aesthetics, anthropology, among others, to this day.

Nature, according to Whitehead, splits into two mutually incompatible spheres of reality at the beginning of modern European thought in the 17th century. Nature, on the one hand, designates the so-called objective nature accessible only to the natural sciences, i. e. the materialistically conceptualized nature of atoms, molecules, cells, etc. At the same time, however, nature also denotes what can be subjectively perceived and experienced, the appearing nature with its qualities, valuations and sensations. For Whitehead, this modern conceptual division of nature, the distinction of primary and secondary qualities, of 'first' and 'second' nature, of the material and mental, implies a fundamental, momentous, and inadmissible incoherence and logical fallacy. His term for this incoherence is "bifurcation of nature" for the question of how to relate these two concepts of nature – 'objective' and 'subjective' – remains largely open for him in the philosophical tradition of Western modernity. Avoiding this inconsistency, sketching a metaphysics beyond the bifurcation of nature, therefore guides most of Whitehead's philosophy: "What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality."[7]

5 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The New American Library, 1948 [1925]), 77.
6 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 37.
7 Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 30.

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Against this background, the bifurcated nature can be understood as a "historical-discursive constellation."[8] In the form of basic conceptual presuppositions that usually remain implicit, it constitutes the "implicit metaphysics of modernity,"[9] or, following Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious,[10] the unconscious metaphysics of modernity. As this implicit or unconscious metaphysics, the bifurcation of nature fundamentally determines not only the conditions and framework of modern thought, but also its content and form. Whitehead therefore calls thinking in the mode of a bifurcated nature the "general form of the forms of thought"[11] of modernity. The bifurcation, then, can be understood as *the* modern convention, culture, or habit of thought par excellence, which, as just mentioned, persists in modern concepts of experience, subjectivity, and agency, as well as in many others, to this day. For this reason, according to Whitehead, it is not so much the explicit as the implicit assumptions that most fundamentally determine an epoch's way of reasoning.[12] For him, one of, not to say the most fundamental and momentous, though in some areas nonetheless very useful of all the implicit presuppositions of thought of modern philosophy and science, characterized by the bifurcation, lies in the endeavour to describe reality on the basis of substance and quality, subject and predicate, particular and universal: "All modern philosophy [and science, I.S.] hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. […] We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances […]."[13]

8 Melanie Sehgal, *Eine situierte Metaphysik. Empirismus und Spekulation bei William James und Alfred North Whitehead* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2016), my translation.
9 Ibid., my translation.
10 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
11 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967 [1933]), 12.
12 For criticism, therefore, following Whitehead, identifying the implicit, unquestioned (metaphysical) presuppositions is a priority: "When you are criticising the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible, and this group of systems constitutes the philosophy of the epoch." Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 49–50. In this sense, Whitehead's thought repeatedly revolves around the question of the implicit presuppositions of modern thought.
13 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 49–50.

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Whitehead locates the systematic roots of thinking in the mode of substance and attribute in the hypostatization and illegitimate universalization of the particular and contingent subject-predicate form of the propositional sentence of Western languages. The resulting equation of grammatical-logical and ontological structure leads to conceiving the logical difference between subject and predicate as a fundamental ontological difference between subject and object, thing and property, particular and universal. In the course of the assumption of separately existing entities, the substance is conceived as a "first subject," i. e. an independently existing or underlying thing (*hypokeimenon*), which 'logically,' though more pointedly in Descartes, is imagined as a "thing which requires nothing but itself in order to exist."[14] Thus, thinking in the mode of substance and attribute suggests not only conceptualizing the subject as something that always already exists independently, therefore is prior to its relations and, despite changing qualitative determinations, does not change in essence, i. e. remains identical with itself through its relations, but also that it stands outside of any referential contexts. This conceives of the subject as autonomous and self-contained and makes impossible the notion of a constitutive relatedness of entities or, with Karen Barad, their "entanglements" and "intra-actions."[15] The problem of the intrinsic disconnectedness of entities, and since Descartes in particular of mental and material entities, is still present today in the form of the body-mind dualism as well as many other dualisms.[16] In the philosophical tradition of modernity, the idea of substance was furthermore received to the effect that the experiencing subject was understood as a first subject in the above sense as well as – and here the implicit anthropocentrism of modern philosophies shows itself once again – self-evidently human. The theoretically unjustifiable idea of con-

14 Ibid., 50.

15 Barad introduces the neologism "intra-action" to point out (in contrast to the notion of interaction, which presupposes the existence of independent entities) that entities do not precede their relations or 'intra-actions,' but rather come into existence through them. Like 'intra-action,' 'entanglement' refers to the fact that there are no independent entities, no relata, but only relations: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating." Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix. The category of relation thus becomes, just as in Whitehead, the ontologically (and epistemologically) primary one.

16 "[F]or Descartes, minds and bodies exist in such a way as to stand in need of nothing beyond themselves individually (God only excepted, as being the foundation of all things); that both minds and bodies endure […]; that spatial extension is the essential attribute of bodies; and that cogitation is the essential attribute of minds. […] Those principles lead straight to the theory of a materialistic, mechanistic nature, surveyed by cogitating minds." Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 144–45.

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ceiving the subject or the self as something that in some way underlies and precedes experiences has become a 'necessity of thought' at the latest with Descartes' *cogito*. And because the subject can never be the object, and the other way around, the object can never be the subject itself, the self becomes the only substance which – in self-reference – can be experienced and undoubtedly known. This "human exceptionalism" (Haraway) is evident not least in the absolute special status accorded to self-consciousness in the philosophy of modernity.[17]

In general, Whitehead's critique of substance metaphysics is directed less against Aristotle himself than against the reception and careless adoption of the idea of substances in modern philosophy and science, precisely the notion of substances as self-identical material.[18] Historically, Whitehead sees the bifurcation sealed with the triumph of Newtonian physics, within which the mechanistic-materialist understanding of matter was universalized and seen as an adequate description of nature in its entirety. In this way, scientific materialism became the guiding principle and implicit assumption of the modern conception of nature altogether:

> One such assumption underlies the whole philosophy of nature during the modern period. It is embodied in the conception which is supposed to express the most concrete aspect of nature. […] The answer is couched in terms of stuff, or matter, or material […] which has the property of simple location in space and time […]. […] [M]aterial can be said to be *here* in space and *here* in time […] in a perfectly definite sense which does not require for its explanation any reference to other regions of space-time.[19]

The erroneous conception of matter as "simply-located"[20] owes itself again to the presupposition of the substance-quality model criticized by Whitehead as ill-considered and false abstraction. For explanations following the doctrine of the simple location and the associated idea of an absolute space and an absolute time, matter is merely characterized by being at a certain time (now) in a certain place in space (here), thus to exist independently. For these accounts, therefore, only the *external* relations between the matter-particles are relevant, which are to be understood as purely external insofar as the matter-particles mean nothing for each other, are irrelevant for each other. The assumption of the simple location

17 Sehgal, *Eine situierte Metaphysik*.

18 Whitehead rejects this view in the strongest terms in his Philosophy of Organism, as he calls his philosophy: "It is fundamental to the metaphysical doctrine of the philosophy of organism, that the notion of an actual entity as the unchanging subject of change is completely abandoned." Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 29. According to Whitehead, reality must be conceived on the basis of our concrete experience, i. e. as a living one, and that means one that is continually changing, indeed having agency.

19 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 50.

20 Ibid., 59.

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thus implies a primal disconnectedness of the pieces of matter – which, by the way, has been ruled out within physics itself since the general theory of relativity – and thereby, according to Whitehead, abstracts from the complex and manifold interconnectedness of entities.[21] As a result, in scientific materialism, nature in toto appears as a "meaningless complex of facts."[22]

Whitehead's rejection of mechanistic materialism is not only due to the immanent development of the physics of his time, which, from thermodynamics to the theory of relativity and quantum physics, limited the validity of the materialistic view even within physics itself. Instead, what he found problematic was the interpretation of Newton's understanding of matter, meaning the universalization of the materialistic conception of nature or the mathematical approach, which was carried out within physics as part of its triumphal procession and its transmission to (de facto) all other regions of experience. From a philosophical point of view, however, this universalization is indefensible, since its experiential basis in Newtonian physics is so limited that it cannot claim validity outside its limited scope. For thereby Newton's matter particles are not understood as what they are, namely the result of an abstraction, but as the most concrete components of nature as such, as concrete reality. Whitehead therefore tirelessly emphasizes that the materialistic understanding of nature is an abstraction that could only be applied to a certain segment, that is, to the solid bodies or inanimate nature understood in the Newtonian meaning of the term. This error of mistaking an abstraction for concrete experience, of confusing an abstraction with that of concrete reality, is what Whitehead calls the "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness."[23] This logical fallacy poses a far-reaching and highly consequential problem, since it excludes essential areas of experience from the metaphysical context by "explaining [them] away."[24] For everything that does not fall within the scope of mathematical explanation and cannot be grasped in mechanistic terms is understood as solely located in the (human) subject and is thus de facto denied "reality" and, consequently, value. This way, the differentiation between primary and secondary qualities, mind and matter, nature and culture, subject and object, human and non-human is constantly reestablished. With the separation of secondary from primary qualities, nature is reduced to dead, passive matter, to raw material; it appears as "dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merley the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaningslessly."[25] In modernity, then, the subject – which, by the way, theoretically as

21 Among other things, it is this assumption of the primal disconnectedness of matter pieces that is not without consequences for the concept of subject.
22 Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968 [1938]), 132.
23 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 52.
24 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 17, 145.
25 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 56.

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well as practically cannot be justifiably defined as naturally human – has to endow the 'dull nature' with qualities and values, with meaning. In the course of separating the secondary from the primary qualities, the 'realm of the objective,' the 'realm of the hard facts' is only complemented by the 'realm of the subjective'; for itself, according to a frequently used formulation in Whitehead, nature is conceived as completely devoid of value, feeling and intention. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities is thus prior to the basic epistemological question of appearance and reality and, as it has become central for many philosophical and especially epistemological debates in modernity:[26] Are qualities something 'subjective' or 'objective,' are they something 'actually in nature' or, as "psychic additions,"[27] 'only in the mind'? Consequently, Whitehead's radical reformulation of subjectivity also takes place within the scope of this question: for in the same way that nature, with the differentiation of the 'two natures,' is conceived as being located outside the subject, vice versa subjectivity is no longer a part of nature, but is, so to speak, in opposition to it, for it is considered external to nature and entirely 'other.' Thus, the separation of primary and secondary qualities is accompanied by the exclusion of subjectivity and therefore of experience and history from the realm of the 'material nature' altogether. From this perspective, then, the body-mind dualism that characterizes modern philosophy is revealed as an expression of the bifurcation of nature, of the division of primary and secondary qualities, and that also means of the exclusion of subjectivity from nature. Whitehead's maxim against this exclusion, on the other hand, is: "All we know of nature is in the same boat, to sink or swim together."[28]

Whitehead's Re-Conceptualization of Subjectivity and Agency

Insofar as Whitehead assumes that it is precisely the modern conception of subjectivity, and with it the modern conception of agency, that has contributed decisively to the bifurcation of nature, to create a metaphysics in which nature does not bifurcate involves not only a radical reconstruction of the concept of nature, but necessarily also an equally radical redefinition of subjectivity and thus agency. Such a reformulation of the concepts of subjectivity and agency includes for Whitehead not least the abolition of the opposition nature/subjectivity and nature/agency: instead of excluding the subject and agency from nature and hence opening the door to bifurcation, subjectivity and agency are for

26 Sehgal, *Eine situierte Metaphysik*.
27 Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 29, 42–43.
28 Ibid., 148.

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Whitehead a basic characteristic of the whole of reality. Mental structures are present, albeit in gradations, everywhere in nature: "Mental activity is one of the modes of feeling belonging to all actual entities in some degree."[29] Not only humans, but everything that exists, every atom, every flower feels. A statement, as Melanie Sehgal notes, "that sounds strange only against the background of a concept of experience implicitly oriented towards conscious, human perception, as it characterizes modern philosophy."[30]

If such a shift of subjectivity into nature is linked to the goal of correcting the materialist-mechanistic conception of the 'natural' world as it has emerged from bifurcation, subjectivity and agency must also no longer be a "privilege of more highly developed entities, let alone an ontological distinction of man."[31] According to this, Whitehead vehemently rejects modern anthropocentrism, which locates subjectivity and agency outside of nature. In this regard, what Bruno Latour formulated much later in the context of his Actor-Network-Theory applies to Whitehead's theory of an immanent, all-encompassing subjectivity as well as agency: "Subjectivity, corporeality, [and agency, my addition] is no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an outside reality is a property of nature."[32]

If the bifurcation of nature is to be overcome, there must be no "bifurcation of actualities"[33] and thus no distinction between sentient-thinking entities on the one hand and 'merely material' entities on the other. The assumption of entities "void of subjective experience"[34] is therefore strictly rejected by Whitehead. Thus, "all final individual actualities have the metaphysical character of occasions of experience."[35] They must be understood as sensing, i. e. "experiencing subject[s]"[36] in a non-anthropological (and thereby also non-anthropocentric) sense. With this, subjectivity has been metaphysically generalized as well as pluralized: subjectivity is everywhere present in nature, no longer bound to consciousness and no longer the sole predicate of man.

Whitehead calls the smallest "individual unity of experience"[37] 'actual entity,' 'actual occasion' or 'organism.' They are "drops of experience, complex and

29 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 56.
30 Sehgal, *Eine situierte Metaphysik*, 209–10, my translation.
31 Reiner Wiehl, "Subjektivität und Bewusstsein in A. N. Whiteheads spekulativer Prozessphilosophie," in *Prozesse des Lebendigen: Zur Aktualität der Naturphilosophie A. N. Whiteheads*, ed. Spyridon A. Koutroufinis (München: Alber, 2007), 30, my translation.
32 Bruno Latour, "On Recalling ANT," in *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 23.
33 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 289.
34 Ibid., 167.
35 Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 221.
36 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 16.
37 Ibid., 129.

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interdependent,"[38] detached from their anthropological and consciousness-philosophical context. Whitehead describes them as dynamic-creative processes of 'growing together' ('concrescence of prehensions'), as processes of synthesis and integration through which the drops of experience 'feel' or 'grasp' the others ('prehension'[39]) and include the others relevant to them ('positive prehension'). They thereby constitute each other as well as themselves. That is precisely what Haraway says, even using Whitehead's term 'prehension': "Through their reaching into each other, through their 'prehensions' or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves."[40] The world thus becomes a world of manifold, perspectival, mutually grasping events; it brims with touching, intersecting, and interlinking subjects. Ontologically, it is then no longer the independently existing that is the primarily existing, but the relational processes of becoming of the drops of experience. Actual entities thus continuously emerge from and merge into each other through their "entanglements" and "intra-actions" as Karen Barad would say: "Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."[41] Or, again with Haraway: "to be one is always to become with many."[42]

Once constituted as a new entity through the process of interweaving relations – in Haraway's words, "becoming-with," "co-becoming," or "co-constitution" – the occasions of experience become the object, the "stubborn fact"[43] for the actual entities that follow them, i. e. they become "objectively immortal."[44] Every subject, therefore, as the object that it has become, enters into the subjects that follow it and emerges from them, with which they coincide in the new thing they have become. Actual entities, then, stand constantly in tension between subjectivity and objectivity, and subject and object become relative as well as functional categories in the process of the relations they enter into and from

38 Ibid., 18.

39 Whitehead uses the neologism 'prehensions' to describe the processes of mutual feeling, of mutual references of actual entities. He thus deliberately avoids the terms 'apprehension' or 'comprehension,' which are implicitly anchored in the realm of human perception and thought: "The word *perceive* is, in our common usage, shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word *apprehension*, even with the adjective cognitive omitted. I will use the word *prehension* for *uncognitive apprehension:* by this I mean *apprehension* which may or may not be cognitive." Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 70.

40 Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 6.

41 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

42 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

43 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, xiv.

44 Ibid.

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which they emerge: "There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects."[45] The categories of subject and object are therefore applicable and valid in their conceptual abstraction only and exclusively after the process of the many entering into a new entity and in relation to other actual entities.

That which an actual entity is in the nexus of relations that constitute it *for itself* as an "*individual* unity of experience,"[46] i. e. as a 'subject,' is what Whitehead calls its "private side" or its "psychic pole"; but since it is at the same time and always also for others, it also has an objective, a "public side" or a "physical pole." In terms of its privacy, an actual entity is a 'subject,' a psychic structure that creates itself from the data given to it by integrating others. One and the same actual entity, however, in terms of its physical, public aspect, is also an 'object,' for "it arises from the publicity which it finds, and it adds itself to the publicity which it transmits."[47] Each actual entity, thus, also poses the question of order anew. By adding itself, it can – like a splash of red paint to a picture – change the entire order: "reality is an active verb."[48] An actual entity is hence on the one hand dependent on its actual world, but at the same time it always goes beyond it, transcends solidified structures and constitutes itself in its process of becoming. Therefore, there is no total dependence of becoming on structure. Accordingly, drops of experience oscillate between finality and causality, between self-causation and effect-causation; both determined and free, they enjoy a degree of self-determination and agency.

How an actual entity evaluates the previous actual events, the 'data' available to it, whether something is of interest for it, concerns it, whether it integrates or rejects what it feels and how it unifies it, is up to its – conscious or unconscious – 'decision.' "It [the subjective form, I. S.] may, or may not, involve consciousness […];" but, in any case, "[it] will involve aversion, or adversion, that is to say, decision."[49] Thus, another concept, predominantly limited to the realm of the human, has been speculatively extended: Agency is no longer linked to consciousness and therefore no longer an ontological distinction of man. Whitehead consequently speaks of "[t]he ultimate freedom of things, lying beyond all determinations."[50] Every event is thus not only an acting, active process, but equally a creative one, and every event therefore also has a unique "subjective form" and a "subjective goal" in which its individuality is expressed. In its process of synthesis or integration every act of experience always strives for "satisfaction," "self-fulfillment" or "self-enjoyment" and thus fundamentally contains the moment

45 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 6.
46 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 129, my emphasis.
47 Ibid., 289.
48 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 6.
49 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 261.
50 Ibid., 47.

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of valuation in its decision. Actual entities therefore also have a value for themselves, whereby intrinsic value is extended into nature. Thus, Whitehead's reevaluation of the notion of value leads to a further dismantling of a classical dualism mediated by the bifurcation of nature, namely that between (valueless) facts and (human) values.

Some Conclusions from a Non-Anthropocentric Notion of Subjectivity and Agency

The outcome of Whitehead's pan-subjectivism is a radically non-anthropocentric, process-relational and pluralistic concept of subjectivity as well as agency; a metaphysics of innumerable, creative subjects, a universe consisting of complex, interlocking drops of experience: "We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures."[51] For Whitehead as for critical posthumanisms "the world is a knot in motion."[52]

Like the critical deconstructivist and historical materialist approaches[53] of critical posthumanisms, Whitehead radically rejects both the (implicit) assumptions and the modes and habits of Western thought that, for him, are part of the historico-systematical constellation of what he calls the "bifurcation of nature." Striking into this notch, he repels modern notions of subjectivity and agency, as for him they are deeply inscribed in the bifurcation of nature. Within the scope of his profoundly non-anthropocentric Philosophy of Organism, he criticizes the implicit insinuation of subjectivity/agency and consciousness and designs a process-relational metaphysics in which neither subjectivity nor agency are any longer a privilege of higher evolved entities, let alone an ontological distinction of man. Instead of excluding the subject and agency from nature and thus opening the door to bifurcation, subjectivity and agency, for Whitehead, must be seen as fundamental features of the entire world. The same is true for critical posthumanist notions of subjectivity: subjectivity is always situated, plural, the result of as well as part of different, overlapping webs of relations, and historically relative and variable. Critical posthumanist conceptions of agency emphasize processes of activation that also include non-human beings (e.g. microorganisms, but also inorganic matter). In this sense, actors are emergent entities that come into being with and in complex processes for the very first time; human subjects cannot lay sole claim to the status of actors. Detached from the

51 Ibid., 50.
52 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 6.
53 Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus: Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: WGB, 2009).

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processes of their activation, they are first of all, like all other things, simply one element among many in this world.

Whitehead's and critical posthumanist approaches not only contribute to questioning hegemonic conceptions of the relation between nature and society, but also productively irritate central philosophical as well as sociological categories like agency, subjectivity, or society. By releasing concepts such as subjectivity and agency from their anthropocentric narrowing, a theoretical space opens up that is not only capable of pointing the way out of the nature-culture or mind-matter dichotomy, but also holds the potential to lay the foundation for a political ecology beyond a romanticizing, ultimately reifying environmentalism.

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Karolina Kumor / Kamil Seruga (University of Warsaw)

Migrant Women in the Contemporary Spanish Theater. In Search of Agency and a New Subjectivity

Abstract
The paper examines five dramas, written by Spanish women playwrights, which address the issue of migrant women. The major analytical approach is migration and postmigration seen from the posthuman and feminist perspective. Within the adopted framework, we take a new look at the depiction of migrant women in terms of their subjectivity and agency. The paper's aim is to establish whether there has been a shift in the way that migration is represented in contemporary Spanish theater. We conclude that such a variation is discernible, though the subjectivity of the migrant women is still represented as forged through the relation of power with the European hegemonic subject.
Keywords: Spanish theater, migration, migrant women, subjectivity, agency

Migration, both as a social phenomenon and its literary and theatrical representations, is undoubtedly a crucial issue that needs to be tackled from the posthuman and feminist perspective. The fate of migrants, refugees or asylum seekers is often construed within the framework of the Self and Other dichotomy. The notion of the Other, although rooted in Hegel's master-slave dialectic and Lacanian psychoanalysis,[1] has been implemented both in feminist critique and postcolonial studies. The fundamental presumption is that otherness should not be considered as an inherent attribute of a given subject (of woman, non-heteronormative person, or person of color). Instead, it is perceived as a projection assigned to an individual (or a group), entailing their construction as bizarre, inferior and abnormal. In other words, the process of 'othering' is understood as a relationship of power and subjection. As such, it has been broadly discussed and analyzed by Fanon,[2] Said, Spivak, and Bhabha.[3] Through discursive practices,

1 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Hellen Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies. The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 155.
2 Homi K. Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition. Foreword to the 1986 Edition," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon, (London: Pluto Press, 2008), xxi–xxxvii.

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the Self emerges as a narrow-minded, self-centered, intolerant and xenophobic, yet powerful, European subject who 'others' the group that is considered a risk and needs to be controlled. The present paper draws on both feminist and postcolonial approaches because, as Braidotti points out:

> the intersection between feminism and race or postcolonial theory are intense and mutually enriching, though not deprived of tensions. Their criticism is focused on two interrelated ideas: the Self-Other dialectics, on one hand, and the notion of difference as pejoration, on the other. They both rest on the assumption that subjectivity as a discursive and material practice is equated with rational, universal consciousness and self-regulating moral behavior, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative opposite.[4]

Thus, as Braidotti concludes, the premise and primary task for posthumanist feminist criticism is "to steer Europe toward a posthumanist project of 'becoming minoritarian' or becoming-nomad, which entails resistance against nationalism, xenophobia, and racism – bad habits of the old imperial Europe, currently replicated in 'Fortress Europe'."[5]

Migration as a social and global process has been traditionally connected with the agency of men. This territory, however, is currently being claimed by women, who actively participate in the migration flow. This phenomenon has been called the "feminization of migration," a term coined in the 1990s by Castles and Miller. It encompasses the participation and agency of women, who adopt a new role as heads of the family (or transnational family), as well as underlines their role as principal caregivers.[6]

The aim of our work is to examine the voice of those playwrights who tackle migration-related themes, and, specifically, represent immigrant women on stage. As García Manso[7] points out, "there is a greater concern in women authorship for aspects such as gender violence in its various manifestations, the occupation of immigrant women in domestic work, transnational motherhood or the rupture of traditional models of femininity linked to the migratory initiative."[8] Also, as Lagarde argues, one of the aims of the gender perspective is to

3 Oscar Thomas-Olalde and Astride Velho, "Othering and Its Effects: Exploring the Concept," in *Writing Postcolonial Histories of Intercultural Education*, eds. Heike Niedrig and Christian Ydesen (Frankfurt: Lang, 2011), 27–34.

4 Rosi Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Gruisin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 23.

5 Ibid., 24.

6 Stephen Castles, Hein de Hass, Mark J. Miller, *The age of migration: International population movement in the modern world* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 16.

7 Translations from Spanish to English are by the authors, unless otherwise attributed.

8 Luisa García Manso, "Teatro, Inmigración y Género: la identidad del Otro en *Víctor Bevch*, de Laila Ripoll, e *Y los peces salieron a combatir contra los hombres*, de Angélica Liddell," *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea*, 36.2 (2011): 115. Original: "se observa una mayor preocupación en la autoría femenina por aspectos como la violencia de género en sus diversas

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contribute to the formation of a new subjective and social configuration: "This perspective is structured from ethics and leads to a posthumanist philosophy, because of its critique of the androcentric conception that left out half of humanity: women. And, despite existing in the patriarchal world, women have existed. It is considerable that humanism has not noticed them."[9] Thus, a new (i. e., posthuman) perspective requires the focus on women, the acknowledgment of their participation in history, society, culture, and politics, as well as the reevaluation of their subjectivity and agency within these domains.

The aim of the paper is to analyze migration dramas written by women from the perspective of posthumanist feminism. We selected five Spanish contemporary stage plays that constitute the corpus: *Y los peces salieron a combatir contra los hombres* (*And the Fish Came Out to Fight Against the Men*)[10] by Angélica Liddell; *Memorias de un mundo perdido* (*Memories of a Lost World*)[11] by Aurora Mateos, *Los girasoles de Van Gogh* (*Van Gogh's Sunflowers*)[12] by Marcela Terra; *Unos pájaros verdes* (*Green birds*)[13] by Carmen Resino; and *El impronunciable jardín de Chiswick* (*The unpronounceable garden of Chiswick*)[14] by Beth Escudé i Gallès. Although there is an exponentially higher number of migration-centered stage plays, our criteria of selection were: 1) women authors; 2) women migrant protagonists; 3) reading of the migrant figure in terms of dehumanization (i. e., zoomorphization) and/or subjugation, and 4) common themes regarding both the subjectivity and agency of women in the migration process. Regarding the latter, in gender studies, subjectivity is the meaning, agency, and social standing of a person within social contexts:

> Subjectivity is forged through relations of power and marginality. In many conceptions of the term, to be a subject one needs to be recognized as such by systems of power and

manifestaciones, la ocupación laboral de las mujeres inmigrantes en el trabajo doméstico, la maternidad transnacional o la ruptura de los modelos tradicionales de feminidad ligada a la iniciativa migratoria."

9 Marcela Lagarde, *Género y feminismo. Desarrollo humano y democracia* (Madrid: Ed. horas y HORAS, 1996), 13. Original: "Esta perspectiva se estructura a partir de la ética y conduce a una filosofía posthumanista, por su crítica de la concepción androcéntrica de humanidad que dejó fuera a la mitad del género humano: a las mujeres. Y, a pesar de existir en el mundo patriarcal, las mujeres han sido realmente existentes. Es notable que el humanismo no las haya advertido."

10 Premiere: October 31, 2003 at the Centro Cultural Rigoberta Menchú in Leganés (Madrid). Direction and scenography: Angélica Liddell. Performers: Angélica Liddell and Gumersindo Puche.

11 Premiere: October 20, 2006 at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, within the Encuentro de Escuelas de Teatro del Salón Internacional del Libro Teatral. Direction: Jaroslaw Bielski. Performers: Jesús Cortés and Raúl Chacón.

12 Not staged.

13 Not staged.

14 Not staged.

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> authority; subjectivity can be granted, but it can also be fought for, contested, and claimed. Feminist poststructuralism and psychoanalysis often emphasize that one becomes a subject and gains agency, paradoxically, through the very systems that one is also subjected to.[15]

Angélica Liddell's text is undoubtedly the best known and most often staged. *Y los peces…* is a postdramatic text: open, performative, and "writerly."[16] Liddell herself appears on stage as La Puta (*The Whore*) and engages in dialogue with the audience, who become an active witness. Her discourse addresses several social issues and inequities regarding migration, but there is one that is conspicuous: migrants crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in fragile vessels called *pateras.* She recounts a story of a pregnant woman who crawls along the Spanish coast after being washed ashore. The image of the woman striving to survive is further intensified as her body is discursively subjected to the process of animalization. Liddell, embodying La Puta, presents, and at the same time attacks, the way Spaniards perceive migrants: the pregnant woman is compared to a huge, black and sickly worm; she resembles a frightening reptile that moves spasmodically and releases foam and algae from its mouth.

As if these descriptions were not already disturbing, the sequence reaches its climax with the horrifying agony of the woman giving birth:[17]

> That spasmodic earthworm expelled a baby
> and kept crawling along the beach
> and kept dragging the baby along with her
> between her legs,
> as if the umbilical cord were the leash of a poodle.
> She expelled the baby as she kept crawling, […].
> At no time did she stop crawling.
> She pushed the baby out,
> the baby fell to the sand
> and the woman didn't stop crawling.
> She carried it as if it were a flap between her legs,
> she left blood stains on the sand.
> She didn't seem to realize that she had given birth, […].
> And when they separated the baby from its mother, the mother was already dead […].

15 Stacy Alaimo, *Gender: Matter* (New York: Macmilian Reference USA, 2017), 425.

16 We analyzed both Liddell's and Mateos' plays from a different perspective: a figure of mother and pregnant woman within the context of Spanish theater plays that tackle migration. See Karolina Kumor and Kamil Seruga, "Migración, maternidad y denuncia: un nuevo campo de batalla en la dramaturgia española de mujer," *Anagnórisis. Revista de investigación teatral* 22 (2020): 178–200.

17 Translation of the stage plays from Spanish to English are by the authors unless stated otherwise.

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> The woman who expelled her baby on the beach
> did not shed a single tear.[18]

This depiction of the migrant as a non-human being who "didn't seem to realize she'd given birth" ends in her demise. The entire sequence may be considered as a very explicit and graphic portrayal of how sovereign power intervenes to dehumanize and deprive migrants of their status as a subject. The zoomorphism in this case takes a rather traditional form: it underlines the alterity of the Other by attributing them features such as savagery, ferocity or even monstrosity. However, the migrant woman is not only equated with a bestial worm or reptile, but also stripped of her psycho-emotional human capacity, as she is portrayed as unaware of giving birth. The scene, filled with its drastic images and the abuse of vocabulary typical of the animal world, serves to emphasize the existence of this border of superiority between "us, Europeans" and "others, immigrants."

Such a binarism represents Self-Other dialectics and underscores the notion of difference as its negative opposite. Moreover, the difference, as Braidotti claims, is "dialectically redefined as 'other than'" and "is inscribed on a hierarchical scale that spells inferiority and means 'to be worth less than'."[19] Within this dichotomy, the subjectivity of migrants, as a discursive practice, is perceived as less than the "rational, universal consciousness and self-regulating moral behavior" of the European subject, and historically, as Braidotti argues, the dominant subject is "implicitly assumed to be masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit, and a full citizen of a recognized polity."[20] That dominant European subject is evoked by Liddell in two ways. On the one hand, the character of La Puta appropriates the hegemonic rhetoric regarding migrants. On the other, she addresses her discourse towards a fictitious addressee, El Señor Puta (*Mister Whore*), who represents the Spanish State. Power, indolence, and even symbolic violence towards migrants are deposited in his figure and, consequently, in the discourse of La Puta. Interestingly, the discourse and the performative act are in constant tension because the words belong to a white man but are performed by a woman. The act of appropriation of

18 Angélica Liddell, *Y los peces salieron a combatir contra los hombres.* (México: Paso de Gato, 2012), 7–9. Original: "Aquella lombriz espasmódica expulsó un bebé / y siguió arrastrándose por la arena / y arrastrando al bebé junto a ella / entre las piernas, / como si el cordón umbilical fuera la correa de un caniche. / Expulsó al bebé mientras se arrastraba, […] / En ningún momento dejó de arrastrarse. / Expulsó al bebé, / el bebé cayó a la arena / y la mujer no dejó de arrastrarse. / Lo llevaba como un colgajo entre las piernas, / dejó la arena llena de sangre. / Parecía no darse cuenta de que había parido, […]. / Y cuando separaron al bebé de su madre, la madre ya estaba muerta […] / La mujer que expulsó a su bebé en la playa / no derramó una sola lágrima."

19 Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," 23.

20 Ibid.

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the dominant male subject's discourse may be understood as a transgressive subversion by means of repetition with difference.[21]

Memorias de un mundo perdido by Aurora Mateos is another example of a play where the notion of Self-Other is materialized. It also revisits the motif of crossing the sea in *patera*, which leads to a tragic outcome. In contrast to Liddell's play, Mateos leans towards more traditional playwriting. Set on the Spanish coast where migrants' corpses are found, the play focuses on the aftermath of a tragic journey. The protagonists are two policemen who come to the scene of the incident. Therefore, the play offers a much more direct representation of hegemonic power in the form of male authorities. However, their attitude towards migrants differs vastly; Pepe is more empathetic and does not perceive them as lesser or devoid of humanity. By contrast, Josemari aggressively deploys the most exhausted clichés regarding migrants. He does not hesitate to call them "shit" and "trash," and therefore is not capable of recognizing the victims as human subjects or human beings. It is most accurately illustrated by his ruthless observation that on the coast "we have tuna, air and Africans who die or not, depending on the day."[22] The attitude of Josemari shows that, once again, the migrants are not considered human from the dominant European subject's perspective, as their "social and symbolic existence is disposable and unprotected."[23]

The significant link between the works of Liddell and Mateos is the focus on the migrant woman, whose body appears disfigured and dehumanized. In Liddell's play, the migrant woman dies in the act of giving birth, whereas in Mateos' play, the policemen notice that one of the migrant victims was pregnant. Liddell opts for the semantic field of the bestiary, while Mateos leans towards reification, by reducing the woman to the function of a mere incubator. The already poignant scene becomes even more tense and dramatic when Pepe, examining the woman, realizes that the fetus is still alive and can be saved. This revelation causes further disagreement between two male protagonists. While Pepe attempts to take action to save the fetus, Josemari not only refuses to act, but prevents his partner from doing so, thus demonstrating his inability to perceive migrants as human beings. He does not even hesitate to pull out his gun and shoot the dead woman's belly. His cruel, bestial and homicidal act accentuates the symbolic meaning and dimension of the female body. It is represented as an object liable to the violence of others and configured as a metaphor for the failure of migrants in the construction of the subjectivity that remains in transit. This act, in similarity to the

21 Judith Butler, *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 189.

22 Aurora Mateos, *Memorias de un mundo perdido*, accessed July 18, 2022, http://auroramateos.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Memorias….pdf.pdf, 4.

23 Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," 24.

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deformation of the pregnant bodies in both Liddell's and Mateos' works, projects the tragic vision of the condition of migrant women. Their death is anonymous, and, in this context, we cannot but connect it with Lampedusa, because in both cases "the prevailing image is one of an indistinct mass of corpses, well beyond the threshold of individuality."[24]

Yet another approach to the agency of a migrant woman can be observed in Marcela Terra's *Los girasoles de Van Gogh*. The play presents two women, Amina and Badra, who are detained in an immigration detention center and awaiting the decision on their possible deportation. Although the play is devoid of explicit maritime space, the setting is yet another hostile space that affects the migrant protagonists. The insecurity of this no-place is further accentuated by their impossibility to choose their destiny freely. Both women are aware that their situation depends only on the good will of the hegemonic subject. Even though it does not materialize as a person, we can consider the hegemonic power's influence as being represented in the heterotopic space of the detention center. Interestingly, Amina is convinced that they let her stay in the country because, as she puts it, "they owe her that." It raises the question about the conscience of Europeans and their attitude towards migrants. From time to time, as Amina puts it, they need to make a grand gesture to rid themselves of guilt. Therefore, it should not be perceived as kindness, compassion and humane treatment, but rather as a calculated manifestation of power and a political game.

The dire situation makes the women engage in a conversation that concerns their migratory experiences. Within the dialogue, a certain level of competitiveness can be sensed since they focus on the cost they had to pay to cross the border. The story of Amina seems relevant because it alludes to the act of crossing the sea to reach Europe. During the crossing in the *patera*, she lost her daughter, who slipped into the water and drowned, as well as her husband, who tried to save their child. Amina had no choice but to carry on with her young son clutched to her chest, hoping that she would at least save him. After several hours of floating, they reached the shore, and the woman observed that she emerged "from the sea on all fours, like a bitch with her puppy in her teeth,"[25] but the child was no longer breathing. Interestingly, Terra also compares the migrant figure to an animal, but the interpretation differs from the one presented in the discussion of Liddell's play. She appears not only as a survivor but also as an active and determined figure who strives to keep her offspring alive at all costs.

24 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "Lampedusa," in *Posthuman glossary*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 229.

25 Marcela Terra, "Los girasoles de Van Gogh," in *Sillas en la frontera: mujer, teatro y migraciones*, ed. Concha Fernández Soto (Almería: Editorial Universidad de Almería, 2018), 358. Original: "del mar en cuatro patas, como una perra con su cachorrito entre los dientes."

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Moreover, *Los girasoles de Van Gogh* is yet another stage play that underscores the forces of nature, namely, the sea. Although it can be argued whether the latter has the status of a social agent or an object, one cannot omit the discernible connection between migration (migrants) and the maritime space. The presence of the sea is an undeniable element of the Spanish migration theater, and the force of nature is intertwined with the theatrical representation of migration either spatially or thematically. Above all, it is represented as an agent that remains beyond the control of human subjects yet affects them in the network of interacting entities. Here, we allude to Latour's concept of "actant." Bennett summarizes Latour's perspective, identifying how agency can be ascribed both to organic and inorganic entities and that "[t]he key point here is that actants have efficacy: they make a difference, produce effects and affects, alter the course of events by their action."[26] The sea, as seen in the plays, is a space that actively influences human agents. In all the analyzed plays, the sea considerably restricts the agency of the migrant protagonists and/or produces tragic occurrences. In addition, the sea reveals itself as "a geography of violence and abjection where the 'human' is continuously tested, worked upon and reframed"[27] in the context of Self-Other dialectics.

So far, we have discussed those stage plays that focus on the migration phase, i.e., in which migrants are depicted as victims, whose journey is inevitably connected with failure and demise. Yet there are playwriters who tackle the postmigration phase, i.e., where migrants are in the process of or are already inserted within the sociocultural framework of the new society. With *Unos pájaros verdes*, Carmen Resino intends to pay homage to migrant women who work as maids, cleaners, caregivers, etc. and who, apparently, achieved success. The protagonist, a Latina woman called Lusinda, is hired to take care of a disabled man in a wheelchair at his home. Referring to the key notion, migration, Resino uses an allegory of eponymous green birds. The Spaniard tells a story of colorful tropical birds who once arrived in Madrid, causing confusion and fear among its residents. The protagonist recalls that, initially, he despised the new birds. Over time, however, he realized that the presence of the tropical birds, rather than threatening the native species, makes possible a friendly exchange between them. Clearly, he is establishing an analogy between the multicolored birds and the Latin American migrant women who came to Spain in search for work. Moreover, the conclusion is that the arrival of the migrant women did not translate into an invasion that unbalanced the labor market. On the contrary, it responded to the needs of an aging Spanish society because Latin American migrants compensate

26 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

27 Mezzadra and Neilson, "Lampedusa," 229.

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for the shortages in the labor market. They take the jobs that are undervalued and, consequently, rejected by Spaniards. As the migrant protagonist acknowledges, these are dead-end and unpleasant jobs, which, nevertheless, they perform without hesitation and even with a certain amount of enthusiasm.

It seems evident that the perspective of the old man is rather unrealistic, yet clearly it is him who dominates the dialogue. He speaks from the position of a unitary and hegemonic European subject who controls the discourse, whereas Lusinda hardly ever takes the floor in the conversation. The audience does not get to know either her reasons for or the circumstances of her emigration; even though she underscores that her employer is "nice," "kind" and that she "doesn't get bored with him and likes to listen to him," her true opinions and affections remain unknown. As the play nears its end, the old man reveals that he has decided to include Lusinda in his will, claiming that she deserves it more than any of his children. At first glance, Lusinda's migratory experience is one of success since she has obtained a stable and secure job, she has successfully adapted to the new reality and has been rewarded for her hard and demanding work in an unusual way. However, Lusinda's presence appears blurred and, to some extent, diminished by the male protagonist's patronizing power, the "European gaze." It may lead us to the conclusion that while Resino's intentions are clearly aimed at dignifying migrant women and their endeavors, it is still a play about migration, which, like so many others, shows that migrants depend predominantly on the goodwill of the host country's inhabitants, its individuals, and not on solutions offered by the governing system.

The system we are hinting at seems to be the main subject of *El impronunciable jardín de Chiswick*. The stage play begins in medias res with Fadouma appearing in court. The woman, who is originally from sub-Saharan Africa, emigrated to London where, as she confesses – not without a slightly bitter undertone – "you have been welcoming me into your 'civilization', as you call it, for thirty-one years."[28] She arrived in London in pursuit of utopian paradise,[29] or, simply put, to improve her quality of life. To do so, she starts to practice the profession she used to perform in her native country: female genitalia circumciser. Strangely enough, that is not what she stands accused of, which, instead, is the fact that she only simulated the ablation. In other words, the incisions she performed were minuscule and did not end with the mutilation of the external genitalia.

28 Beth Escudé i Gallès, "El impronunciable jardín de Chiswick," in *Dramaturgas del siglo XXI*, ed. Francisco Gutiérrez Carbajo (Madrid: Cátedra, 2014), 245. Original: "son treinta y uno los que llevan acogiéndome en su 'civilización', como dicen ustedes."

29 Francisco Gutiérrez Carbajo, "La ciudad como utopía y antiutopía en el teatro español actual," in *Espacios urbanos en el teatro español de los siglos XX y XXI*, ed. Cerstin Bauer-Funke (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Georg Olms, 2016), 342.

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Her main motivation for emigrating was to maintain her relatives in Africa. She arrived in London as a mature woman "with little knowledge and a lot of skill"[30] because, as she says: "I endured hunger and my children's hunger, but I could not withstand that of my grandchildren. It is a triple suffering to see children suffer because of the suffering of their children."[31] Thanks to her profession, she was able to establish a model of transnational maternity and, thus, grant survival to her family in Africa: "I sent the money to my little village. And that's how my children and my children's children and, very soon, the children of children of my children lived."[32] Furthermore, she achieved success in the British underground world of ablations and succeeded in adapting to the sociocultural framework of the new society so that she is now able to invest in property. She appears before court not as a poor, African migrant woman, but as a prosperous, wealthy businesswoman: "Am I rich? Yes. Was I poor? Yes. Very poor? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. There are not enough yeses to portray the misery of our past, Your Honors."[33] Fadouma's agency is proven not only by her current status, but also by the fact that she recounts her story with her own, unfiltered voice. In contrast with *Unos pájaros verdes*, the protagonist does not appear opaque and muted since the dramatic form of the text is Fadouma's monologue, a long statement addressed to the judges. As we have already mentioned, she is accused of simulating ablation instead of performing the procedure; in other words, she is on trial for committing fraud. Thus, she is not being held responsible for female genitalia mutilation (a prohibited and condemned act in Europe), but for lying to her clients. Fadouma herself emphasizes that she is not being tried for the procedures that she has performed in the past (which led to death of a patient on at least one occasion), but for enabling Muslim women in Britain to function normally: "I've committed fraud. I've defrauded my clients who don't writhe in pain during intercourse. No pelvic infections or sterility. Neither they nor their children die during childbirth. I have done nothing what could be described with the adjective: irreversible. Thus, for all this, I declare myself, Your Honors: guilty."[34] Here lies the irony of the dramatic situation that underscores the superficiality and hypocrisy of Occidental values.

30 Escudé i Gallès, "El impronunciable jardín de Chiswick," 246. Original: "Mi poco saber y mi mucho oficio".

31 Ibid., 245. Original: "Soporté mi hambre y la de mis hijos, pero no pude con la de mis nietos. Es triple sufrimiento ver sufrir a unos hijos por el sufrimiento de sus hijos."

32 Ibid., 246. Original "Mandaba el dinero a mi pequeño poblado. Y así vivían mis hijos y los hijos de mis hijos y, muy pronto, los hijos de los hijos de mis hijos."

33 Ibid., 245. Original: "¿Soy rica? Sí. ¿Fui pobre? Sí. ¿Muy pobre? Sí, sí, sí, sí, sí, sí. No hay suficientes síes para ilustrar la miseria de nuestro pasado, Señorías."

34 Ibid., 248. Original: "He cometido fraude. He defraudado a mis clientas que no se retuercen de dolor durante el coito. Nada de infecciones pélvicas ni de esterilidad. No mueren en los

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Conditioned by its history of hegemony, Europe is accustomed to evaluating the world with reference to its own ideal of civilization, not contaminated with "the perspective of the Other." Fadouma's monologue seems to challenge this ideal because being Other herself bestows her with a relevant distance to assess Occidental values and Europeanness itself. At the beginning, along with so many migrants, she perceives Europe as "the *patte d'oie* of an exuberant eighteenth-century garden. Several paths to choose from, always with the reward of beauty in the background: obelisks, Doric columns, temples, statues."[35] Her experience as a migrant in Europe, nonetheless, enabled her to see through the thoroughly constructed imagery and reconsider her stance: "Three years were enough for me to realize that the obelisk had no back; that the pavilion was a mere decoration; that Apollo had no buttocks. That everything was true only from a distance."[36]

From our argumentation so far, it would seem that *El impronunciable jardín…* depicts the migrant figure as possessing not only full agency, but also a subjectivity that resists definition by hegemonic forces. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that the framework of the dramatic situation is a trial. However direct and unsilenced Fadouma's voice sounds, she is still dependent on the latent power represented by the invisible judges. This power diminishes her agency and negatively affects her subjectivity.

The purpose of the current study was to determine how the subjectivity and agency of migrant women are represented in contemporary Spanish theater. On the basis of five dramas, which we selected according to established criteria, we found that the representation of migrant women's agency is rather underwhelming. On the one hand, we can observe that the migrant women in the analyzed plays exercise their agency in the migration process, both during the journey and in the postmigration phase. On the other, most migration theater plays present the tragedy of migrants' journeys. In the first three plays, the agency of the migrant women is portrayed as limited and invariably dependent on the agency of the European subjects. We may also argue that these plays show that the agency of migrant women is correlated and determined by other relational forces (sea as inorganic agent). In this context, Resinos' and Escudé i Gallès' plays appear to be different because they depict apparently successful postmigration phases and dispense with the presence of the sea actant. However, they fall within

partos, ni ellas ni sus hijos. No les he hecho nada acompañado del adjetivo irreversible. Y, por todo ello, así me declaro, Señorías: culpable."

35 Ibid., 246. Original: "la *patte d'oie* de un exuberante jardín dieciochesco. Varios caminos a escoger, siempre con la recompensa de la belleza al fondo: obeliscos, columnas dóricas, templetes, estatuas."

36 Ibid., 246. Original: "Tres años bastaron para darme cuenta de que el obelisco no tenía parte posterior, que el templete era un simple decorado, que Apolo carecía de nalgas. Que todo era verdad solo desde la lejanía."

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the same pattern of the relation between a hegemonic subject and a migrant figure. The plays question the human condition and, above all, the universal potency of the European subject.

There is another apparent discrepancy between the plays that tackle the migration journey and the dramas that depict the postmigration phase. In the former, the subjectivity of the migrant women is seen through the lens of the animal world. This zoomorphization should be read rather traditionally and anthropocentrically, that is, as a means to materialize the binary opposition between superior-inferior or human-inhumane. Migrant women appear animalized because they are not recognized as subjects by systems of power. Interestingly, zoomorphization is also used in *Unos pájaros verdes*, but its function is different. It is neither brutal nor offensive, but it may still be read as dehumanizing of the migrant figure because of the hierarchical vision of the society in which the migrant always seems to be subjugated. Although in the last play zoomorphization is not directly referenced, it can be perceived as latent. Fadouma's profession can be labeled as barbaric, inhumane, and contrary to everything that Occidental values epitomize. In other words, she could be perceived by a hegemonic subject as a ferocious monster who inflicts damage and pain on other humans, notwithstanding that the reality is quite the opposite.

All of the plays show the subjectivity of the migrant women being forged through relations of power with the European hegemonic subject, which always positions itself as superior and even divine. It is him who can decide the fate of others. From the perspective of posthuman feminism, we can certainly observe that the Spanish women playwrights try to dismantle the notion of a hegemonic, European subject who imposes their power on the basis of universal, rational and humanistic principles. They try to show the European audiences that being a human does not necessarily imply being humane.

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Posthuman (?) agency and Vampire Narrative(s)

Abstract
Contemporary Vampire Narrative(s) are in complicated relations with posthuman theory(ies). The latter can be embodied within the narratives as well as form an analytic tool and a point of view on the narratives. This article explores these three ways in which posthumanism(s) are embedded with the Vampire Narrative(s). The narratives are studied with the aid of structural methods (therefore, they are considered as part of bigger Narrative entities). Special emphasis is put on the construction of the agency, subjectivity and personhood within the narratives. Vampires are clearly non-humans, and the narrative's view on them reflects the views on non-humans. Denying their subjectivity expresses the denial of subjectivity to every non-human being (and, further, to non-white, non-male, non-normative humans – historical attributes of someone who is not fully human). Objectified vampires can hold agency, but this agency becomes abject. New narratives represent subjectified and positive vampires, but they do this by humanising those vampires. Such narratives tend to reaffirm the anthropocentric attitude of society rather than to transgress it. Consequently, even inclusive Vampire narratives advocate for assimilation, again affirming, although in a different way, the primacy of Western culture, which conjecturally stands for a universal "human" culture. Even those rare narratives that stress the radical difference of the vampire do not seem to escape an individualistic paradigm. Taking Cary Wolfe's definition of posthumanism as something that transgresses the awarding of an exceptional ontological value to humans, this article states that those narratives seem more transhumanist than posthumanist.
Keywords: agency, subjectivity, Vampire Narrative, posthumanism

Introduction

The vampire has a long story: as a figure of folklore, as a figure of fiction, and as an object of analysis in both of its versions: folkloric and fictional. While having emerged within Slavic folklore,[1] the vampires[2] that we know nowadays are

1 See: Łukasz Kozak, *Upiór. Historia naturalna* (Warszawa: Evviva l'Arte, 2021); Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial and Death* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1988).

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products of Western fiction. They are modern Western monsters[3] created within Western narratives from the appropriated folkloric figures that Westerners "discovered" when they were "discovering" Eastern Europe.[4] In fact, the Vampire was born with and within the specific narrative structure that I will later on call the Vampire Narrative.

This vampire was an embodiment of monstrous Otherness in almost every sense and every category: racial, sexual, gender, medical, etc. and has been analysed as such with the use of marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial and other critical theories.[5] The vampire has also traditionally been linked to nature in opposition to civilisation, replaying the fundamental Western divisions of nature-culture, wilderness-civilisation, body-mind/soul, materiality-spirituality, female-male, animal-(hu)man, etc., in which nature (but not naturalness[6]) was devalued. Changes that occurred during the 20th century permitted a reversal of this devaluation in some cases. The figure of the vampire, be it represented as a negative monster or a positive hero, carries a strong potential for ecological, ecocritical and posthumanist readings: it can demask traditional humanist and anthropocentric categories and promote new attitudes. However, this aspect of the figure has received surprisingly little attention.[7]

The vampire was constructed as a liminal creature similar to humans yet not human. In fact, it was not only a non-human being: it was an un-human and inhuman being. Vampires can be the perfectly symmetrical opposite, the negation

2 By "vampire", I mean here the fantastic creature that drinks blood and is specifically called a "vampire" (or some of its original folkloric names such as *upiór* or *upyr*). I am not interested in other sorts of vampiric creatures, such as bloodsucking gods, witches, strigois, ghouls and others, and neither am I interested in "psychic vampire" figures.

3 Nick Groom, *The Vampire. A New History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

4 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

5 See, e. g., Maria Janion, *Wampir. Biografia symboliczna* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2002); David Baker, Stephanie Green, and Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, eds, *Hospitality, Rape, and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture: Letting the Wrong One In* (London: Palgrave, 2017); Laura Westengard,, *Gothic Queer Culture. Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019); Tabish Khair, and Johan Höglund, eds. *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and others.

6 Sigmund Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7 (1990).

7 There have been some ecological and eco-critical studies of the vampire, notably the book by Simon Bacon, *Eco-Vampires: The Undead and the Environment* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020) and some texts in popular monographs, such as Rebecca Housel, Jeremy Wisniewski, and William Irwin eds. *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2009) or Rebecca Housel, and William Irwin eds. *True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010). There are also some articles that try to deal specifically with posthumanism in relation to the vampire, which I will quote later on in this article.

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of the human – the un-human un-dead thing – and they can be the inverse (and reverse) of the human – the in-human alien being, a human *a rebours*, subverting the current norms of humanity and therefore seen as cruel, anti-social, deviated. Moreover, a vampire can be both at once: an un-human thing that is nonetheless judged as cruel in a way that livings beings are judged, and an in-human being that is denied any subjectivity or free will.

In the modern era, with its scientific view, every creature, even a fictional one, needed "rational" classification. As a non-human being, the vampire was "naturally" a sort of animal (playing with yet another modern opposition: human-animal). Indeed, in most known 19th-century narratives, vampires transform into animals (Carmilla into cat, Dracula into dog/wolf, bats and others). They communicate with animals (Dracula commands wolves and rats), and they are generally animal-like (Dracula is hairy, stares like a predator, walks like lizards). In the figures of these vampires, animals are not only represented as radically different than humans: they are turned into beasts and are monsters. Conversely, perhaps vampires are monsters because they are animals who try to usurp the rights of humans. They reverse the roles: animals feed on humans, while "normally" it should be humans who feed on animals. Humans cannot be food.

Furthermore, vampires blur the boundary between animal and thing. Dracula changes into a wolf, but he also changes into a mist. The fact that the narrative does not see much difference between these two transformations tells a lot about how animals have been treated in Western culture. Dracula is frequently referred to as "the Thing." Objectification seems a consequence of animalisation. Being a corpse and being a non-human seem to belong to the same semantic area. The vampire is a threat to the social and "natural" order because it is an anima-ted (anima-l) object that refuses to be passive claiming its own agency. These tropes will later on permit some authors to link the vampire to the machine, as does Gabriel Delmas in *Vampyr Draco Maleficus Imperator* (2004).

This article looks critically at the construction of these modern divisions[8] and the ways in which they are shifted, blurred, resisted, and re-negotiated or, on the contrary, re-established through and within the 21st-century vampire narratives. My article proves that, despite some important subversions made to the anthropocentricity of the Vampire Narrative, the essential elements of Western-centrism and individualism as a necessary condition of subjectivity could not really be transgressed. Therefore, even the most serious subversions observed in the Vampire Narrative are more about the beings primarily judged as in-human becoming the norm of a new humanity than about the emancipation of the non-human and more about widening the domain of the human than about including the un-human. In other words, I argue that the observed subversion is trans-

8 See: Cary Wolfe, *What is posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

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human(ist) rather than posthuman(ist). My definition of posthuman(ism) stands in contrast to the most common use of the term in vampire analyses. Most researchers tend to use "posthuman" as a broad term designating anything that is "beyond" the human.[9] I find the simple trans-cendence of the human self (literally: trans-human) inadequate, and, after Cary Wolfe, I define the posthuman as something that comes "after humanism," i. e., something that moves past the "exceptional ontological value for humans."[10] While I differ with Francesca Ferrando when it comes to the detailed definitions of these terms,[11] I do agree in the essential differentiation between transhumanism as a form of humanism that redefines a human being and posthumanism as a decentralised view that departs from a humanistic perspective in favour of a past-exceptionalist attitude.[12]

My research has a narratological character.[13] The analysis of a broad corpus of works has permitted me to identify the basic (meta)structure emerging from/embodied in those narratives. The semiotic basis of the Vampire Narrative consists of the relations between three main figures. The semiotic analysis of each

9 See e. g.: Simon Bacon, "The Post-human Vampire," in: Bloom, C. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic.* ed. Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 555–67; Lars Schmeink, "Of Posthuman Vampires: Science, Blood and Becoming-With," in: *Posthuman Gothic*, ed. Anya Heise-von der Lippe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), 54–73; Chris Koenig-Woodyard "'Lovie – is the vampire so bad?': Posthuman Rhetoric in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend,*" in: *Posthuman Gothic*, ed. Anya Heise-von der Lippe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), 77–92; Hadas Elber-Aviram, "Constitutional Amnesia and Future Memory: Science Fiction's Posthuman Vampires," in: *Undead Memory: Vampires and Human Memory in Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Bacon, and Katarzyna Bronk (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014); Avipsa Mondal, "Representation of Posthuman Desire in Stephanie Meyer's *The Twilight* Saga," *Ashvamegh*, 14 (2016); M. Inbaraj, and Abdul Mohammed Ali Jinnah, "Posthuman Vampire: A Biomedical War Weapon in Justin Cronin's The Passage," *JARDCS*, Vol. 12, No. 7: 95–98. Stoker's *Dracula* has received some posthumanist analysis: Zümre Gizem Yılmaz Karahan, "A Posthuman Vampire: Conflicts of Rational Science and Racial Views in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Social Sciences Research Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2020): 73–80; Ronja Tripp- Bodola, "The Vampire as Posthumanist Pharmakon: Towards a Critical Medical Humanities," in: *Posthuman Pathogenesis: Contagion in Literature, Arts, and Media*, eds Başak Ağın, and Şafak Horzum (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), 207–26.

10 Greg Pollock, "*What is Posthumanism?* by Cary Wolfe (2009) Reviewed by Greg Pollock," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, Vol. IX, Is. 12 (2011): 235.

11 Such as the defining of transhumanism mostly by technology and the continuation of Enlightenment ideas of progress.

12 Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms Differences and Relations," *Existenz. An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, Vol. 8, No 2, (2013): 26–32.

13 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press. 1968); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958); Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in: *Image-Music-Text.* (London: Fontana, 1977); Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale. Recherche de méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).

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figure, which was then put in the context of the triangle structure of relations, permits me to establish the meaning of the whole narrative. The first step of the analysis was to look at the figures in their relations and to state which figure is presented as a positive one and which as a negative one. This step also meant determining which figure was passive and which was active (which has agency). The thorough analysis of each figure helped to determine what each figure actually represented in the narrative (reason, scientific viewpoint, pureness, contagion, wilderness, etc.). (Re)organising them within the context of their relations permitted me to see the actual meaning of the narrative – in other words, what the narrative supports or advocates and what it condemns, discourages or simply neglects.

However, I find that placing the whole meaning/significance of the Narrative in only the metastructure/monomyth is a little reductive. What I find interesting is the variations (as opposed to variants) of the structure (its versions, particular features, hybridisations and elasticities). The analysis of the Vampire Narrative is first and foremost the analysis of the constant play of stories (narratives) with their fundaments (the Narrative [structure]). Every narrative is built upon the tension between the invariant (and its variations) and the variant. Finally, as was shown by the works of poststructuralists such as Umberto Eco[14] or Jacques Derrida,[15] the centre of the structure is its internal function and the relation between elements. Every narrative is a play of the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible.

My structural analysis will focus not only on the existing elements, but also on the ones that are lacking. In other words, my analysis will contain elements of Derridian deconstruction. Thus, the narratives will be read according to the apparent intentions and re-read against them, using a *resistant reading* technique described by Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch.[16] I will thus analyse the explicit intentional reading of the text but will also engage in an alternative reading, scrutinising the gaps, silences and contradictions. I define the intentional meaning of the narrative as the point of view expressed explicitly or implicitly by the narrator/enunciator/monstrator (Tzevan Todorov's "vision," Gérard Genet "focalisation"). By a "narrator," I mean the totality of ways in which the narrative function(s) is(are) carried out (to avoid any confusion caused by the metaphorical personalisation [narrator, enunciator, etc.] of those functions in the narratological theory, I prefer to use terms such as "standpoint of the narra-

14 Umberto Eco, "The semantics of metaphor," in: *Semiotics. An introductory anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 250–71.

15 Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967); Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).

16 Henry Jenkins, and John Tulloch, *Science Fiction Audiences: Doctor Who, Star Trek and Their Fans* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

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tive"[17]). "A consideration of what is foregrounded, what is backgrounded and what is simply omitted […] throws further light on the hierarchy of values which […] [the stories] construct. Analysis of narrative point of view, focalisation and narrative voice can show how the reader's sympathies are manipulated."[18]

My narratological analysis is deeply uprooted by a posthumanistic approach. As Donna Haraway has said: "figures are never innocent."[19] My deconstruction of the figures is posthumanist, as I treat figures-as-relations and as I seek to reveal their entanglements and transcorporeality that the Narrative both masks and unmasks. Fictional bodies are as much a part of posthuman entanglements and transcorporealities as material bodies, or rather all bodies are material in diverse types of materiality – all are relational and transversal: *Dracula*; Askhenazi migration; the discovery of pathogens as foreign agents; professor Van Helsing and doctor Seward fighting the vampire; vampires as polymorphous, gender-fluid, living (or rather walking) cancers that can be cured and returned to unclear, human families; or Trumpist anti-mexican politics, culebras and Texas rangers.

In a sense, the Narrative is treated as a posthuman entity, as holding a creative agency of its own: it is something that realises itself through and on its concrete embodiments and embedments, respectively. Yet, it is not a Platonic abstract ideal: as much as the Narrative realises itself through the bodies of the concrete narratives (movies, serials, comics, novels, novellas, etc.), it is composed, created by them. Therefore, the Narrative is a virtual yet embodied spatial structure performed by the narratives that construct it, and transgress it, making the transgression a part of the structure itself.

17 I do agree here with classic French narratology (with Tzevan Todorov, Gérard Genette or Paul Ricoeur) that the narrator is present in every story (narrative) in the sense that every story needs to be recounted to be a story (otherwise it is just the event happening) and that, because every relation is mediated, every narration has its narrative functions, the way(s) it is related/presented, its vision and standpoint. Nonetheless, some stories try to seem as if they were telling themselves, or on the contrary, they try to extricate the person of the Narrator as one of the actors of the narrative (with whom the narrative can disagree, taking the side of other actors) and in that way hide the second, actual narrator (narrative vision). Some media are especially prone to making narrative modes transparent, to hide the narrative instance: film, for instance, gives the impression that events are taking place before recipient's eyes or theatre/performative art that seems in-mediate (deprived of any mediation between performers and recipient).

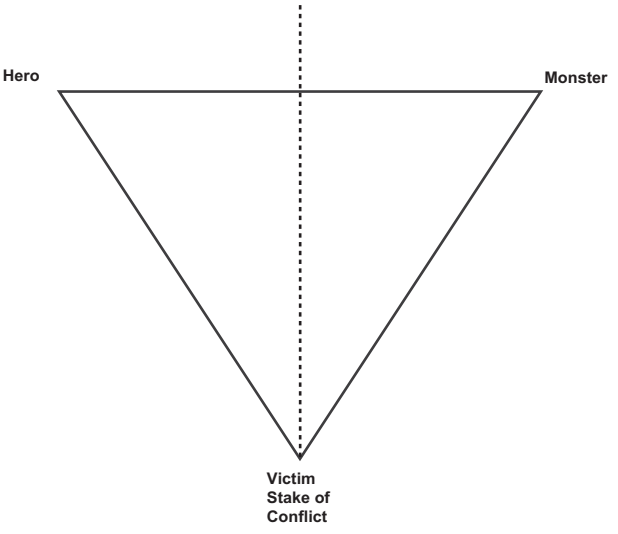
18 Margery Hourihan, *DECONSTRUCTING THE HERO. Literary theory and children's literature* (London and New York: Routledge 1997), 4.

19 Nina Lykke, Randi Markussen, and Finn Olesen, "'There Are Always More Things Going on Than You Thought!': Methodologies as Thinking Technologies: Interview with Donna Haraway," in *Bits of Life: Feminism At the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008), 38.

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Vampire Narrative

Roland Barthes stated that narratives are omnipresent, numberless and distributed amongst different substances.[20] Narratives are representations that are semiotic and, therefore, have a significance. Vampire narratives perform (they reflect and produce at the same time) social representations of Otherness through their structure. A structural analysis shows that many stories form one Narrative. The "semes" are combined into invariant elements and embodied in diverse variants. The basic (meta)structure of the Vampire Narrative consists of the relations between three main figures: the Hero, the Monster and the Victim.



In what I call the Primary Vampire Narrative, the narrative that was created in modern times, the Monster was a non-human vampire, the Hero was a brave man (or men) and the Victim was usually a passive female. However, since its emergence at the beginning modernity, the Vampire Narrative has evolved, and today we can speak of different variants of its new forms, which coexist with the Primary Vampire Narrative that also still finds its embodiments (e.g., Stephen Sommers *Van Helsing* (2004), David Slade *30 Days of Night* (2007), Scott Stewart *Priest* (2011)). The changes moved essentially in two directions. The first, which I call the New Primary Narrative, gave the actors new features (be this another gender, sexuality, colour or class or simply new characteristics like more openness or tolerance). The second, which I call the Reversed Narrative, reversed the

20 Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 79.

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structure: it made the vampire the Hero and the slayer the Monster. Finally, I identify the Ambivalent Narrative, the most rare variant, in which all the actors are equally monstrous and heroic, passive and active.

The Vampire Narrative has an interesting colonial history. The vampire figure emerged in the myths and legends of Slavic folklore (as *upyr*). In the 19th century (or even before), however, it was appropriated by Western culture, which created its own Vampire Narrative, expressing its own fears and sense of superiority. Eastern Europe was marked as a non-Western (and thus a global) Other. In the further process of globalisation, the Vampire Narrative came (or returned) to the East. Non-Western cultures made their own narratives (their own versions of the Narrative). In my article, however, I will focus on the Western Vampire Narrative, giving it, nonetheless, some critical non-Western insight. I will also focus on just one aspect of the 21st-century Vampire Narrative: its posthuman element(s).

Posthuman theories

Posthuman theory is not unified. Actually, there are many posthuman theories. In regard to Vampire Narrative(s), posthuman theories can be employed as an analysing tool or considered an internal element of the story. This means that posthuman theories can be used to examine the Vampire Narrative (something that has not been carried out until now, despite a broad range of studies of vampires and vampire stories[21]) but can also be embodied inside vampire narratives. They can be applied by the narrator, represented by protagonists and/or spoken about by actors of the stories.

For the premises of this article, I will focus on critical posthumanist rereadings of categories such as subjectivity, agency and personhood. Personhood, i. e., recognition as a "person," is the highest possible social/cultural status given to a being. It is traditionally given to humans only: in fact, in everyday English,

21 See: Susan Chaplin, *The Postmillennial Vampire. Power, Sacrifice and Simulation in True Blood, Twilight and Other Contemporary Narratives* (Leeds: Palgrave, 2017); Amanda Hobson and U. Melissa Anyiwo, eds, *Gender in the Vampire Narrative*, (Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2016); David Baker, Stephanie Green and Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, eds, *Hospitality, Rape, and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture: Letting the Wrong One In* (London: Palgrave, 2017); Dale M. Hudson, *Vampires, Race, and Transnational Hollywood*s (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Maria Janion, *Wampir. Biografia symboliczna* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2002); Claude Lecouteux, *Histoire de Vampires: Autopsie d'un mythe* (Paris: Imago, 1999); Bruce McClleland, *Slayers and their Vampires: A cultural History of Killing the Dead* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2006); David McNally, *Monsters of the Market. Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011); J. Gordon Melton, *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead, 3rd Edition* (Michigan: Visible Ink Press, 2010); Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires. Film, Fiction And Popular Culture* (Manchester: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) etc.

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"person" and "human" are frequently used as synonyms. "Agency" is both used in a broader sense as an intentional or unintentional influencing of the order of things (a stance well represented by Bruno Latour[22]) and in a narrower sense (Markus Schlosser's stance can be seen as an opposite extreme of Latour's understanding of agency[23]). Notably, Schlosser, despite his interests in quantum physics and non-Western conceptions of consciousness, stands on the side of fully conscious agency as the only agency possible. In fact, as I will argue later, "conscious" agency in Schlosser's conception is a human(istic) agency *par excellence*, even if his and similar conceptions are being used to fight for animal rights.[24]

Agency needs to position itself in relation to subjectivity. Obviously there have been many definitions of subjectivity, but, to summarise, in Western philosophy (the very one that invented the term) being a subject "is, roughly, to experience or to be conscious."[25] In this article, I will follow the minimal definition, treating subjectivity as a capacity of basic cognition and (value-laden) experience. In a very broad sense, every sentient being counts as a subject. This statement is of great consequence as, contrary to the object, relations with a subject impose moral responsibilities.[26]

If we compare Latourian and Schlosser's conceptions, we can therefore see that they mark the spectrum of ways in which such a notion might be comprehended. Latourian "agency" embraces more and Schlosser's agency embraces less entities. According to Latour, things can be agents; there are both objects and subjects who are agents. According to Schlosser, agency is a property of subjects only, and, perhaps, is not even not possessed by all subjects. Schlosser defends the standard event-causal approach[27]: "a being has the capacity to exercise agency just in case it has the capacity to act intentionally, and the exercise of agency consists in the performance of intentional actions and, in many cases, in the

22 Bruno Latour, "Agency at the time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45 (2013).
23 Markus E. Schlosser, "Agency, Ownership, and the Standard Theory," in *New Waves in Philosophy of Action* ed. Jesus H. Aguilar, Andrei A. Buckareff, and Keith Frankish (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 13–30.
24 See, e. g., the text postulating recognition of animals as legal subjects: Andrzej Elżanowski and Tomasz Pietrzykowski, "Zwierzęta jako nieosobowe podmioty prawa," *Forum Prawnicze* no. 1 (2013): 18–27.
25 Bradley Rettler, "Object," in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2017); https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/object/#ContObjeVsSubj; accessed: 17. 02. 2023.
26 Andrzej Elżanowski, "Wartość życia podmiotowego z perspektywy nauki," *Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria* 18, no. 3 (2009); Andrzej Elżanowski and Tomasz Pietrzykowski, "Zwierzęta jako nieosobowe podmioty prawa," *Forum Prawnicze* no. 1 (2013).
27 Markus E. Schlosser, *The Metaphysics of Agency*, PhD Dissertation, Philosophy, St. Andrews (2007).

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performance of unintentional actions."[28] In this he shares the viewpoint of phenomenological cognitive semiotics.[29]

The vampire as a paradigm of non-humanity

Despite its changing representation across different historical contexts, the figure of the vampire always remains somehow non-human. In folklore, vampires were frequently seen as humans with some specific condition/capabilities. Among religious writings that supported the idea of vampires' existence, vampires were portrayed as demons, humans or human bodies possessed by demons[30] and therefore a non-human metaphysical evil. Modernity started with the development of modern science, and vampires were one of first topics of international scientific discussions.[31] Their non-existence confirmed, they have, however, remained closely linked to the scientific imaginary within the Narrative that has emerged around the Vampire figure. Within vampire narratives, discovering (!), hunting and slaying a vampire were represented as scientifically methodical: it is not an accident that Bram Stoker's Van Helsing is a professor. Even if the methods were sometimes taken from the domain of occultism or religion, the approach was, overall, that of modern science: categorising, classifying, analysing and cataloguing. Vampires were defined with the aid of biology and medicine. The hunters were modern men and, indeed, frequently scientists, doctors and professors.

The more modernity[32] progressed the more scientific the Vampire Narrative has become. Vampires were considered un-human in terms of the biological sciences. They were either (un)dead human bodies, moving corpses, or different adversary species. They were also, in many senses, frequently linked to diseases: vampires were carriers of disease (vampirism), of corruption and degeneration

28 Markus E. Schlosser, "Agency," in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (first published 2015; substantive revision 2019); https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/, accessed: 17.02.2023.

29 Juan Mendoza-Collazos, and Jordan Zlatev, "A Cognitive-Semiotic Approach to Agency: Assessing Ideas from Cognitive Science and Neuroscience," *Biosemiotics* 15 (2022), 141–170. The authors seem to go even further, as they claim there is no agency without at least a minimal sense/feeling of agency. Therefore, it seems that, for them, agency relies on at least minimal consciousness.

30 For pre-modern and pre-fictional vampires see: Łukasz Kozak, *Upiór. Historia naturalna* (Warszawa: Evviva l'Arte, 2021).

31 Nick Groom, *The Vampire. A New History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

32 I refer here to modernity as starting with the Enlightenment. I prefer to call the period after the Middle Ages "New Ages": modernity is a part of this period, but it does not encompass it. Similarly, I consider post-modernity as a part of modernity, and for that reason I sometimes refer to it as "late modernity."

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(in a biological and in a metaphorical sense that was still conceived within medical terms), they were sick themselves and infecting others, and they were also the cause of their victims' illnesses and demise. They were linked to medical conditions from anemia to those that were contagious, such as tuberculosis or sexually transmitted diseases. Later on, they started to symbolise the disease itself (they are walking cancers in Manou Chintesco *Les Compagnons d'HeLa* [2004]). In postmodernity, the theme of vampirism and/or the vampire as virus or parasite became more and more popular, starting with Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and continuing into the 21st century with narratives such as *The Strain* or the *V-Wars* series (2019).

In some narratives, however, the medicalisation and biologisation served a different purpose: Vampires were represented as humans with a medical condition. This mostly occurs in the new types of Vampire Narrative (specifically, in what I call the Good Vampire Narrative). In a sense, by framing the vampire figure as suffering an illness, postmodern narratives return to the folkloric way of seeing vampires as very special/specific humans. But, contrary to folkloric legends, postmodern narratives use very modern tools to represent vampires in such a way.

Among all the possible iterations of the vampire (as a sick person or a sickness itself, as a different species or different race, as a mutation of a human being), the figure of the vampire as a dead body seems the most radical. Vampires are non-human and extremely different (un-human) because they are not living beings: they are corpses, things. Not only are they treated exclusively as bodies, carriers of bare life, on which everything can be inflicted[33] but they are also only bodies. Slavoj Žižek, drawing on Lacanian theories,[34] points to the vampire figure as a figure representing the perfect Thing, free from any constraint to create its identity, subjectivity and identification and free from the constraint of a mirror, of reflection and of auto-creation. For Žižek, such objectivity is the highest form of free subjectivity. Outside the philosopher's reflections however, the radical objectivity of the vampire becomes abject.[35] Bram Stoker's Dracula, and many vampires that are modelled after him, are called "the Thing" in order to designate them as an absolutely repulsive Other.

33 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
34 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).
35 Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1980).

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Agency and Subjectivity within the Vampire Narrative

Primary Vampire Narrative

In the Primary Vampire Narrative, vampires are first criminalised: they are obviously murderers and also rapists, as one of Barbara Hambly's book characters explicitly puts it.[36] They can also be cast as deviants whose habits are characterised by non-normative sexuality: sadomasochism, homosexuality (dating back to one of the first vampire novels, John William Polidori's *The Vampyre*), transgenderism, or simply female domination or wilfulness, which can be seen as a sexual or psychological deviation that threatens society. They are then medicalised. Fantastic figures from *Being Human* (a British and American serial) represent a whole range of mental disorders from autism to Tourette's syndrome. Vampires with mental disorders are also featured in narratives such as Mary Harron's *The Moth Diary* (2011), which includes a traumatised teenager, in David Wellington's novels, and in Barbara Hambly's *Renfield: Slave of Dracula* (2007). They are narcissistic and unstable, as represented by Saint-Germain from Manou Chintesco's *Les Compagnons d'HeLa* (2004) or by Cathy from Alain Ayroles, Bruno Maiorana, and Thierry Leprévost's BD trilogy *D* (2009–2014). The narrator-protagonist of Gabriel Delmas' *Vampyr Draco Maleficus Imperator* (2004) has multiple self-affirmed mental disorders. Other figures that are not vampires are also medicalised; these include the vampires' victims, who are constantly threatened to sink into vampirism, and their allies, such as Renfield the lunatic in Stoker's *Dracula.* Vampirism, in itself, can represent a disability (for instance, the inability to remain in the sun) or disease. The medical condition is racialised, just as race is medicalised, and the Vampire Other is frequently a racialised or/and geopolitical Other, from the Eastern-European Dracula to the Latino vampires from *From Dusk Till Dawn.* Finally, the vampire is animalised: examples include Dracula changing into a wolf, the rat-like, Jewish-like Nosferatu from Murnau's classic *Nosferatu* (1922), the beastly vampires from David Slade's *30 Days of Night* (2007) or the hive in Scott Stewart's *Priest* (2011). Animalisation in modern, carno-phallogocentric[37] Western culture has been the surest way to objectify Others, and it has been widely used in vampire narratives. Thus, vampires can be hunted and – in late-modern works where they are present in masses – butchered like animals. They need to be killed because they are animals and, all the more, because as such, vampires dared to undermine the patriarchal order of the world

36 Barbara Hambly, *Renfield: Slave of Dracula* (New York: Berkley, 2007), 228.

37 Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 96–111.

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in which only the (hu)man can eat every other creature[38] – but no creature should feed on humans.

The Classic Narrative has casted only subjects – and only some subjects (i. e., male, heterosexual, Western, middle-class heroes) – as rightful agents. In the Primary Vampire Narrative, the Vampire is an agent without being a subject: its abjectness consists of it being a thing endowed with agency. Therefore, the agency of the vampire in the Primary Narrative is a Latourian agency, but it is framed as abnormal. The "normal" world, which is presented as a model, follows Schlosser's version of agency in which agency belongs to subjects only. This is the "normality" that the appearance of a monster threatens. This is the "normality" that needs to be restored.

The Vampire Narrative expresses a fear of and protests against the agency of things and non-humans (with the latter being frequently classified as the former or, at least, as quasi-objects). Fighting with a vampire is a fight undertaken by subjects for their exclusive agency: they fight to take away the agency from a thing (or the Thing[39]). Schlosser's conception of agency seems to be applied also to the Victim figure: the narrative denies them (usually her) agency, but accords them subjectivity. However, the Victim figure is a domain in which both conceptions meet: subjectivity deprived of agency quickly turns out to be irrelevant and, in most cases, often leads to objectification. Moreover, the taking of a denied and forbidden agency by the Victim leads to her abjectification: the Victim who becomes an agent becomes a vampire(ss).

The conception of personhood within the Vampire Narrative is even more fluid and vague. "Personhood" is more exclusive than "agency" and "subjectivity," a fact that Latour and Schlosser seem to conjecturally agree upon, but the relations of personhood to "humanity" are unclear. In classic 19th- and early 20th-century narratives, personhood seems to be restricted to humans only, but it seems to be a category that is even narrower than "humanity," as personhood is often denied to the human servants of vampires, such as Renfield or the whole range of cinema's Igors. "Personhood," along with "agency" and "subjectivity," are discursive tools of domination. Being a person is not defined either explicitly or implicitly, by the use of clear categories of distinction. Rather, some fluid criteria of sociality (social subjects) or morality (moral subjects) are applied. Yet usually actors within narratives are labelled sharply and without hesitation.

38 Carol J. Adams, "Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition," in: *The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory, 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Te Continnum International Publishing Group, 2010), loc. 944.

39 Dracula in Stoker's novel is frequently referred as the Thing (with a capital) as he grows in the eyes of the heroes to be the embodiment of the monstrous object-agent in general. It is the same with Master in *The Strain,* he (it?) is the Thing while other vampires of the hive are usually referred to as the things (or munchers).

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"Personhood" within the Vampire Narrative seems to be, on the one hand, a kind of empty signifier,[40] a notion without any specifically defined reference, and, on the other, a crucial notion of differentiation and othering. With the use of these categories of agency, subjectivity and personhood, the division of characters into creature/being and thing, object and subject, non-person and person, animal and human are made. The categorisation becomes a tool, and it is used for further othering within human society: humans (female, non-white, non-heteronormative, non-Western, differently-abled, sick, etc.) are being depersonalised, animalised and objectified in the same way that non-humans have been.

Furthermore, subjectivity and personhood in Vampire Narratives are individualistic categories not only in 19th- and 20th-century stories, but also in the 21st century. They all take being an individual as a necessary condition. Individualism, being a base upon which Western civilisation is built, shapes categories of agency, subjectivity and personhood, and so these categories turn out to be Western ones, again marginalising non-individualistic, non-Western cultural orientations (in theory, even excluding them from domains of personhood, subjectivity and agency). Agency, in the Latourian sense, could apply to non-individual agents, but in the Western Vampire Narrative, this kind of agency is marked as abjective: de-individualisation becomes the first step towards dehumanisation, depersonalisation, animalisation and finally objectification.

Evolution of the Vampire Narrative

The evolution of the Vampire Narrative reflected, or rather performed, changes that have occurred in the 20th century. In the second half of 20th century (especially in the 1960s and 70s), some important changes within Western culture led to what has been called a postmodern turn[41]: the social activism of people like Martin Luther King incited the drive towards ethnic and racial emancipation, sexual revolution and the Second and Third Waves of Feminism, which questioned gender and sexual norms. Some controversial groups surfaced in its wake (for instance, in 1971 in New York, The Eulenspiegel Society, a sadomasochist organisation, emerged). Jean Marigny adds to those socio-political factors the

40 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005); Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: a selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Taylor and Francis Ltd, 2006).

41 Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires. Film, Fiction And Popular Culture* (Metropolitan University, 2019), loc. 127, Kindle. The author finds the vampire figure a precise barometer according to which one can periodise the latest history with an accuracy of up to each American presidency.

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deception within capitalist liberal democracy, a will to normalise relations with the Eastern Bloc and the failure of the war in Vietnam that mined the nationalist and colonialist Western discourse and the myth of the brave, noble white man civilising a cruel Oriental enemy.[42] After a post-war period of neglecting animal rights, the movement had its renaissance and a new bloom with the emergence of the Oxford Group in the 1960s, poststructuralist philosophy in France and the publication of Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* (1975). In Western society, both internal and global subalterns fought for emancipation.

These changes were reflected within the Vampire Narrative. First, non-mainstream narratives found their place: not only were they produced but they also found cultural circulation. From William Crain's *Blacula* (1972) to the 21st-century gay serial *The Lair*, racial, ethnic and sexual minorities have produced their own narratives, made both by and for these groups, that express their worldview. Secondly, the cultural mainstream has been inspired by these narratives and has evolved as well. From a narratological point of view, the evolution followed two paths: new features of the actors were developed and the Reversed Narrative with the Good Guy Vampire appeared.[43]

The de-monsterisation of vampires moved from criminalisation, medicalisation and orientalisation to objectification backwards. It went from objectification to subjectification and, further, to (re)personification. This de-monsterisation involved diverse human Others and sometimes even non-humans, i. e., animals, cyborgs, and fantastical species. This process, however, is prone to legitimising some elements of social order, such as the individual Western paradigm, rather than to subverting them: de-monsterisation needs to go through individualisation.

New narratives can be narratives of inclusion or of resistance. Resistance is performed by those who have been othered. If not radically ambivalent (the case I will mention further in this article), narratives can basically revolve around two narrative strategies: first consists on creating (adapting) one's own Narrative so that the resisting group becomes "us," positive heroes (vampire or human), and transforming the mainstream representatives so that they become the Othered ones. Another strategy is to embrace one's Otherness and affirm it: the resisting one is still othered and willingly embraces their abject identity. In the most extreme case, resisting subjects contribute to their Otherness and self-construct

42 Jean Marigny, *La fascination des vampires* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2009), 179. See also: Marie Mulvey-Roberts, "The Vampire of War," in *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 179–220.

43 The term was forged by Margaret Louise Carter in: *Shadow of the Shade: A Survey of Vampirism in Literature* (1975), *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction* (1987), *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics* (1988), *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography* (1989), *Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien* (2001).

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as Other, as in the case of Gabriel Delmas' BD *Vampyr Draco Maleficus Imperator* (2004). In the case of non-human subjects, narratives of resistance within the Vampire Narrative are not possible, simply because non-humans do not make their own vampire narratives, as far as we know.

Inclusion is an operation made from inside the mainstream. Included or self-including subjects are those who have been primarily othered: women, the working class, non-white races, non-Western people, non-heteronormative people, differently-abled and ill people, and animals. Inclusion is, in fact, made from the position of the dominating group, who includes those that they had previously othered. Their power is thus once again performed, and the process of inclusion reproduces it just as it happens in the process of othering. Inclusion never replaces the traditional norms – it simply shifts them. Within the Vampire Narrative, it seems that, in fact, the exclusion of someone is a necessary condition for the inclusion of someone else. A sense of "ourness" can be built only by means of Otherness, and to include means to designate someone else as an object of exclusion. If the transgressive *True Blood* serial tries to be intersectionally inclusive across race, sexuality, disability and class within American society, the serial cannot avoid producing geo-political Otherness between West and (Middle)East. Ifrit, an Arabic ghost, appears to destroy the life of Terry[44] as a pure incarnation of violence and vengeance. Eastern Europe is counted as belonging to the West in Gary Shore's *Dracula Untold* (2014). In this film, an Eastern European prince opposes the Muslim invasion just as Eastern European military forces joined American troops in the Wars in Iraq or Afganistan. Eastern Europe is included because the Muslim Orient is excluded. In *From Dusk Till Dawn* a Latino Texas ranger guards the US border. He performs his duties, which includes the protection of the border from vampire *culebras* coming from Mexico. The racial inclusion of a Hispanic US citizen is performed at the cost of the geo-political exclusion of Hispanic people from outside of the USA. Non-human vampires are present in narratives in which non-human animals are being eaten

44 *True Blood* has received quite a lot of academic critical attention. See relevant chapters in: Laura Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture. Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019); Amanda Hobson, and U. Melissa Anyiwo, eds. *Gender in Vampire Narrative* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016); Sam George, and Bill Hughes, eds. *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the present day* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013); also: Susan Chaplin, *The Postmillennial Vampire. Power, Sacrifice and Simulation in True Blood, Twilight and Other Contemporary Narratives* (Leeds: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires. Film, Fiction And Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019); Morgane Caussarieu, *Vampires & Bayous. Sexe, sang et décadence, La résurrection du mythe en Louisiane* (Saint-Laurent-d'Oingt: Les Éditions Mnémos, 2013). Also a popular monograph: Rebecca Housel, and William Irwin eds. *True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010).

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both by people and by vampires themselves. In fact, in many of these stories, vampires are "heroically" resigning from hunting humans in order to kill animals: we see this among the all-too-noble Cullens from *Twilight* saga[45] and in the character of Stephan from *Vampire Diaries.*[46]

In most cases, the inclusion of non-human vampires is a result of their humanisation: the more similar the being is to a human, the more they can be recognised as subjects and persons. Vampires need to keep, guard and show their humanity, with *Vampire Diaries* explicitly marking bad vampires as those who "switched off" their humanity and the good vampires as those who still have it.[47] The spin-off series (*The Originals* [2013–2018]) flaunts more of the posthuman features of the actors (for instance, shifting between species, associating with the dead, hybridity) but, ultimately, it "creates a supernatural mirrorworld of contemporary human experiences."[48] Jennifer Culver sums up *True Blood*'s human-vampire coexistence: "successful mainstreaming for vampires depends on how well they can play the game of being human."[49] Only human(ised) non-human

45 The *Twilight* franchise is undoubtedly the vampire phenomenon of 21st century that has received the most attention. See, e. g., Susan Chaplin, *The Postmillennial Vampire. Power, Sacrifice and Simulation in True Blood, Twilight and Other Contemporary Narratives* (Leeds: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, eds. *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); relevant chapters in: Barbara Brodman, and James E. Doan, eds. *The Universal Vampire: Origins and Evolution of a Legend* (Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013); Isabel Ermida, ed. *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts* (Rodopi: Brill, 2016) and more. There is also the popular monograph: Housel, Rebecca, Jeremy Wisniewski, and William Irwin eds. *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2009).

46 *Vampire Diaries* has received only slightly less attention than *True Blood.* See relevant chapters in: Sam George, and Bill Hughes, eds. *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the present day* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013); Simon Bacon, and Katarzyna Bronk, eds. *Undead Memory: Vampires and Human Memory in Popular Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014); Amanda Hobson, and U. Melissa Anyiwo, eds. *Gender in Vampire Narrative* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016); also: Red and Vee, and Leah Wilson, eds. *A Visitor's Guide to Mystic Falls: Your Favorite Authors on The Vampire Diaries* (Dallas, Texas: Benbella books, 2010).

47 *Vampire Diaries'* posthumanist aspects are discussed in Maria Marino-Faza, "More than Human: Reading the Doppelgänger and Female Monstrosity in Television Vampires," in: *Posthuman Gothic*, ed. Anya Heise-von der Lippe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), 125–42. Yet, she has to admit that "Characters such as Stefan Salvatore, his friend Lexi Branson, Caroline Forbes, and, later, Elena (once she becomes a vampire) are portrayed as more human than humans themselves" (135).

48 Verena Bernardi, "Subtropical Gothic: New Orleans and Posthuman Supernaturals in *The Originals,*" *eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2019), 105.

49 Jennifer Culver, "Dressing Up and Playing Human: Vampire Assimilation in the Human Playground," in: *True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You,* eds. Rebecca Housel, and William Irwin (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010), 25. Erica McCrystal (Erica McCrystal, "Coexistence and Hospitality: The Gothic Utopian Vision of *True Blood*,"

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vampires are, indeed, considered subjects; this attitude is perhaps best expressed in the title of the series *Being Human.*[50] As something that might be called vegetarianism, the ethical abstinence of good vampires is anthropocentric as well since its ethical value relies on not attacking humans – frequently at the expense of non-human animals. The changes in the Vampire Narrative do not really make it less anthropocentric and even carno-phallogacentric, but rather seem to legitimise anthropocentrism and carno-phallogacentrism in new ways.

The process of inclusion is actually analogical to the process of othering: the same narrative tools that served the othering now serve the inclusion, just with their vector changed. While medicine is compromised as tool of othering, it is appreciated as a tool of inclusion, and so it is with individualism, personification, the notion of civilisation or humanity. Tools of inclusion are taken from the repertoire of othering because the modern Western culture that the subjects are included in dispose of this repertoire of fundamental structures. The process of inclusion performs them as basic Western categories to the same measure as does the process of othering.

in: *Posthuman Gothic*, ed. Anya Heise-von der Lippe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), 93–108) tries to argue with this position, claiming that *True Blood* postulates a posthuman Gothic utopia where all hierarchies are dissolved and a mutualistic relationship of different human and non-human beings is achieved. It is, however, difficult to prove that point: notably the author chooses to keep silent on the costs of the achievement of the final idyllic state, the picnic table where human and non-human protagonists gather. To come to that table, vampires need to submit to human structures (such as monogamist marriage) and, in the same way, Sookie needs to kill her vampire love and embrace the lifestyle of the average human wife.

50 There is an excellent posthumanist analysis of the American series by Zofia Kolbuszewska, "The Ultimate Post-Humanist Nostalgia in the TV Show *Being Human* US: Monstrous Home as an allegory of the Human," *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, Vol. 66, No. 11 (2018), 113–24. The author risks over interpretation in her reading the whole house in which the three monsters live as an allegory of one human/posthuman being. She justly points out that the idea of an assembled human being bursts the humanistic idea, as does the monstrosity of the inhabitants. I would add that the surplus is created, and the allegory needs to go past its humanism, or in other words, the allegoric human being deboards its borders. However, in the end Kolbuszewska needs to admit that "The manifold alienation of the characters inhabiting the house follows from their repudiation of the horrific posthumanist dystopia in favour of an ambiguous utopian vision in which the future model what it means to be the human is in part, at least, based on the nostalgic reconstruction of the model of the human put forward by the classical humanism" (120).

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The actual non-human subject

It would be extremely difficult to find a narrative that casts a vampire figure as not morally bad (and even more difficult to find a vampire that is "good") while showing it as a non-human (and non-humanised) subject. This can seem quite surprising, as the attribution of the status of another species to vampires should, in fact, pardon them from evil. If vampires are a different species, they do not have to follow human social norms and human ethics. Such a vision seems to be realised in Suzy McKee Charnas' *The Vampire Tapestry* (1980). But apart from this, a similar vision is rarely embodied. The species difference is rather used to produce radical Otherness. The more non-human the species of vampires seems to be, the more monstrous they appear. An extreme example can be the objectively repulsive hive of vampires in *Priest:* here, vampires are explicitly designated as a different species that is a threat to humans by their very existence.

However, the above-mentioned evolution of the Vampire Narrative has also led to the emergence of yet another new version that is difficult to classify: this version is ambivalent, and includes the ambivalent figures of Vampire, Hunter and Victim. In fact, the ambivalence of any of the main figures imposes ambivalence on others: if the Vampire is both good and bad, fighting them is both good and evil, and the Vampire's opponent is good and bad, too. If the Victim is ambivalent, protecting and attacking them is equally good. In fact, the ambivalence of the Victim makes it impossible to differentiate between attack and protection since it blurs the differences between Victim (Stake of Conflict), Hero and Monster and, consequently, frames all the three figures of Vampire, Hunter and Victim as a little of all three. In a sense this kind of narrative is the most radical. An ambivalent Victim is Owen in Matt Reeves' *Let Me In* (2008).[51] Owen is bullied by his colleagues (boys that have all the prototypical features of Solar Heroes) and is protected by a female (or perhaps a non-binary) vampire called Abby. While Owen is certainly persecuted, he is also aggressive and dreams about the brutality that he will finally commit once he ties the forever bond with his vampire friend. While Abby is protective of and caring towards Owen, she (or they) is more than frightening when tearing off the bullies' heads. Abby will use Owen for her day protection and she doesn't hesitate to cruelly kill or to make others kill for her – even innocents. Finally, the bullies are typical macho men and

51 The movie, just like the Swedish book it was based upon and the earlier Swedish film adaptation, received some academic attention. See, e.g., Simon Bacon, "The Inescapable Moment: The Vampire as Individual and Collective Trauma in *Let Me In* by Matt Reeves," in: *Undead Memory: Vampires and Human Memory in Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Bacon, and Katarzyna Bronk (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014); Simon Bacon, *Becoming Vampire: Difference and the Vampire in Popular Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

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oppressors, but they are also victims of the revenge that Abby takes in the name of Owen.

There is also an ambivalent Vampire girl, Vampira, in Francis Ford Coppola's *Twixt* (2012).[52] As a human, she is the victim of abuse of the vampire hunter fanatic priest, and she is helped and liberated by a vampire teenager named Flamingo. She turns into a vampire but remains as the fanatics' target (specifically, of the police officer who appears to be equally fanatical as the priest from the past). However, she is also a monster feeding on the protagonist-narrator and the police officer. In both movies, vampires are non-human and non-humanised. Both movies avoid or make perverse the process of humanisation. Abby and Vampira are subjects despite not being humans. According subjectivity to non-humans is a transgression, yet it also means that every positive agency is restricted to subjects only. In other words: the vampire does not need humanisation to hold a positive agency, but still needs subjectification. Again: normative borders are shifted but not abolished.

"Good" object agent?

If it is difficult to find a non-human vampire subject that would not be a villain, it is even more difficult to find a narrative that represents a positive (or at least a non-negative) object agency. The dichotomy of subject-object is reaffirmed, in a different way, in the Reversed Vampire Narrative: the version with the Good Vampire-Hero figure that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Just like the Primary Vampire Narrative, the Reversed Narrative tends to normalise vampires and to present the *status quo* of subject-agent and passive object. Both Primary and Reversed Vampire Narratives annihilate the vampire's abject agency: the former by killing the vampire and the latter by removing the vampire's transgressive objectivity – by subjectifying vampires. The transgressive conceptions of Bruno Latour, and far less those of Slavoj Žižek, do not find embodiment within the Vampire Narrative. There is no vampire agent that is represented as a thing, or the Thing, and holds positive agency.

Peter Watts, a biologist, considers the issues of subjectivity and agency, including, non-subject agency, in his Firefall novels: *Blindsight* (2006) and *Echopraxia* (2014).[53] He mutinously describes the non-human non-subject in its di-

52 See: Stéphane du Mesnildot, "La Brume flottait sur le lac," in: *Le Miroir obscur* (Pertuis: Rouge Profond, 2013), 117–20.

53 *Blindsight* has been analysed in Hadas Elber-Aram, "Constitutional Amnesia and Future Memory: Science Fiction's Posthuman Vampires," in: *Undead Memory: Vampires and Human Memory in Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Bacon, and Katarzyna Bronk (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014). The standpoint is, however, more transhuman than posthuman.

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verse forms, including extremely intelligent life. Artificial intelligence, vampires and aliens are all more intelligent than humans and all capable of their own agency. Artificial intelligence is created by humans but goes far beyond human imagination and is far more developed than even the cyborg humans. Vampires are somehow re-created by humans: they were an extinct species that humans decided to bring back and are also far more intelligent than humans, being themselves a kind of biological machine. Their only flaw is an allergy to geometrical shapes (such as the cross) that caused their extinction in the first place. They overcome this flaw in the narrative and are set to replace humans as the dominant species on Earth. Finally, there are aliens, whose presence is discovered at the beginning of the narrative: the mission to find and examine aliens is then sent into space. Aliens are equally intelligent to vampires, and they are biological beings. They are agents, but not subjects, and they are submitted to a series of experiments, or rather tortures, all justified by their lack of subjectivity, thus lack of sentiency. In fact, no matter how much the narrative tries to convince us otherwise, it remains unclear whether they are completely insentient or whether, being hive creatures, they only lack individual sentiency but do have some sort of collective sentiency. For the narrative, the sentiency can only be individual, and the lack of thereof makes aliens' agency and intelligence ethically irrelevant. The only thing worthy of ethical consideration is individual consciousness. It is also the only thing worth saving in the universe, and the only beings provided with it, and therefore the only subjects in the universe, are humans.

Perhaps the most posthumanist Vampire Narrative can be found within comics, which are a pluralistic (graphic and literary) medium.[54] Fabien Nury's John Cassaday trilogy *Je suis légion* [I Am Legion] (2004, 2006, 2007), along with its prequel series *Les Chroniques de légion* [Legion Chronicles] (2011–2012) made by Nury in collaboration with multiple cartoonists, tells the story of rather ambivalent vampires, Vlad (Dracula) and his younger brother Radu. In *Je suis légion*, vampirism has two forms. The first consists of the vampires (Vlad Tepes Dracula or his younger brother Radu) changing their incarnations as they wander from one human body to another with the aid of blood infusion. It is diachronic: Vlad and Radu move through time, changing consecutive incarnations, but keep all their memories. In this way, the vampires remain themselves and yet become a new person (which includes gender and/or species fluidity). The second form of vampirism is synchronic. It consists of taking control over animals' or humans' bodies (frequently over multiple bodies at the same time), again with the aid of blood. The vampire's extended (multi)body becomes a kind of collective trans-

54 See: Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, trans. by Ann Miller. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

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human or even posthuman consciousness, thus transgressing Western fundamental norms of anthropocentrism and individualism.

In both forms, vampirism uses many bodies, and it is impossible to actually distinguish the individual bodies of Vlad and Radu. They were born human in 15th-century Transylvania, but since then Vlad has been an American *conquistadora*, a Napoleonic captain, a British gentleman and British special service agent while Radu has been a swarm of rats, an Aztec king, a Gypsy wanderer, a pack of wolves, and a Romanian girl in service to the Nazis. One could be tempted to say that the transhuman consciousness of Vlad/Radu moves from body to body, but in fact, the consciousness itself changes: with every incarnation it is transformed, extended and enriched with the consciousness residing inside the new body – or perhaps with the consciousness *of* the body it takes.

The case is similar with regard to the synchronic form of vampirism. Again, one could be tempted to say that the bodies taken and controlled by vampires are prothesis of the basic body and form its transhuman extensions. However, vampires frequently and explicitly express another view: they highlight the fact that they *are* many. They are all of their bodies, they are the legion, and they are all those men, women, adult, children, animals at the same time. Therefore, they are indeed posthuman beings. The bodies that form a vampire in all its diachronic and synchronic dimensions are things to be taken, colonised, manipulated and controlled, and yet those things are agents: not only are they colonised by the ready-made consciousness of a vampire, but they form, re-form, and trans-form this consciousness. The final agency is collective and obfuscates the division between subject and object agency. They are Haraway's vampires that effect "category transformations by illegitimate passages of substance."[55] They embody "the kinship exchange system in which gender, race, and species – animal and machine – are all at stake."[56] The vampire's surplus erases individual Enlightenment identifications: "In those zones, uninvited associations and dissociations are sure to undo one's sense of the self same."[57]

Yet, the story eventually revises itself: Vlad is cast as a Solar Hero who needs to stop his too transgressive brother in order to save the world. To do this, he needs to take away from Radu the woman who is pregnant with Radu's child. They must not live: Radu's child would be able to transform the whole world into one collective consciousness/organism. That perspective is presented as dystopian, horrible and totalitarian. Western individual and liberal norms are reaffirmed:

55 Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second Millenium. FemaleMan _Meets_OncoMouseTM; Feminism and Technoscience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 214.
56 Ibid., 216–17.
57 Ibid., 215.

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hive consciousness is something abject, and feelings such as love are only possible if individuality exists. In- and un-humanity must be fought.

Conclusion: Western-centered posthumanism

Watts' novels demonstrate an important lack in posthuman representations (and representations of posthumanism[s]). Despite the ground-breaking theories of such thinkers as Donna Haraway or Karen Barad, most non-anthropocentric discourses (re)presented in vampire narratives are transhuman rather than posthuman, and the Vampire Narrative remains profoundly individualistic. Sentiency is represented as an individual ability to sense, and thus only individuals are subjects. The highly intelligent aliens who most probably have hive consciousness are considered to lack consciousness just because their consciousness is not individual – and bees or ants are considered this way, too.[58] This does not only lead to an important exclusion of some non-human beings who are indeed radically different from humans. It also performs a hidden Western-centrism, individualism being the very basic Western paradigm.

It seems that posthumanism in the Vampire Narratives is quite superficial. Not only do most of the stories about vampires centre around humans with vampires being humanised in order to be represented positively, but also almost all of them performs subjectivity as a *sine qua non* of positive agency. Subjectivity is exclusively individual, which indirectly strengthens Western-centrism. Therefore, despite all the changes that the Vampire Narrative has been through in the last two centuries, it is still profoundly human-centred and Western-centred.

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58 See: Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). While the author relates to the examples of the uncanny and abject representation of insects in media, she nonetheless explores insect-like swarming and a hive way of being as a project, a positive inspiration for the future. This element is completely absent in the Vampire Narrative, which treats the hive as the ultimate abjection not only to be avoided but to be erased as a possibility for humans.

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IV. Rereading and Deconstracting

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Promethea: Post-Promethean Intra-Active Agency and the Medial Affordances of the Comic

Abstract
The comic book series *Promethea* (Alan Moore, 1999–2005) tells the story of the mythical figure Promethea, who can be materialized through creative acts. The paper explores how the comic series stages a post-Promethean intra-active agency and what role the meta-fictional reflections on the medial affordances of comics play in this. While the comic book series *Promethea* imagines a post-Promethean intraactive agency, it did not redeem it. After an introduction to Promethean agency and a consideration of the media affordances of comics in *Promethea*, the following essay considers the extent to which Promethea can be understood as the personification of post-Promethean intraactive agency.
Keywords: Promethea, agency, comic, metafiction, creativity

Promethean Agency in Alan Moore's Comic Book *Promethea*

Commencing as a superhero story, the comic book series *Promethea* quickly proves to be much more than that. It tells the story of the mythical figure Promethea, who can become embodied in the material world in a process initiated by creative acts like writing poetry or painting. In the following, I will explore the reflection on Promethean agency and art production in Moore's comic, something Di Liddo has described as "a self-reflective deliberation about the power of narration, the role of the artist, and the modes of representation of comics."[1] *Promethea* is written by Alan Moore in collaboration with several artists, mainly J. H. Williams III (pencils) and Mick Gray (inks). It was published between 1999 and 2005 in 32 issues and later in several book collections.

In light of Baradian thoughts on the "materiality of imaginings and the imaginings of materiality,"[2] *Promethea* is of interest, especially for three reasons:

1 Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 87.

2 Cf. Karen Barad's Keynote for the Conference "Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches" (University of Warsaw, 3–5 February 2022) entitled "What Flashes Up: Errant Wanderings/Wonderings: The Materiality of Imagining, the Imaginings of Materiality."

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First, from the perspective of intertextuality it offers a unique variation on the Prometheus theme and modern dualistic thinking; second, the comic tells a fascinating story about the relation between imagination and materiality; and third, an intra-active worldview is combined here in an interesting way with a reflection on the media affordances of the comic. In what follows, I will investigate how the comic series *Promethea* stages a post-Promethean[3] intra-active agency and what role the metafictional reflections on the comic play in this. I claim that while the comic book series *Promethea* ostensibly imagines a post-Promethean intra-active agency, it then fails to redeem it. Before I elaborate on this hypothesis, I will first introduce the comic series and its main protagonist in more detail. In a second part, building on this, I turn to the medial affordances of comics reflected in the comic itself and address here, among other things, the question of why the genre of comics proved so congenial to the author Alan Moore for his project. In particular, the didactic function of the comic in its combination of image and text plays a role that formally reflects Moore's message. In a third part, against this background, I will address whether Promethea can be understood as a personification of post-Promethean intra-active agency.

The story is framed by a preface by Alan Moore, who introduces the (fictitious) history of the character Promethea in literature and pop culture. Promethea is the daughter of a magician and is persecuted by Christians in Alexandria in 411 A.D. To save Promethea, her father's gods transform her into a supra-historical story (#1). Promethea leaves the realm of the so-called Immateria and becomes material when a human being invokes her through a creative act (e. g., through writing a poem about her). Thus, "anyone with imagination and enough enthusiasm for the character can bring her through from the Immateria, by thinking themselves or others into the role."[4] In this way, the poet Charlton Sennet in the 1770s wrote a faerie romance based on his lover, the housemaid Anna, who then turned into Promethea (#4). Margaret Case transformed herself into Promethea "to help out in the trenches of World War One"[5] (#5). Grace

3 By the term "post-Promethean agency", I refer to Bruno Latour's proposals for a "post Promethean theory of action" that critically distances itself from the idea of action as constructing and creating and that instead devotes itself to a careful designing. Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk," in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being*, eds. Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 153; for a discussion see, e. g., Alena Heinritz, "Disruptive Innovation oder Design? Posthumanistische Perspektiven auf die Prometheus-Figur in Literatur- und Arbeitsdiskursen," *Studia Germanica Posnaniensia* XLII (2022): 59–60.

4 Alan Moore, J. H. Williams, Mick Gray, Charles Vess and José Villarrubia, *Promethea: Book One* (Burbank CA: DC Comics, 2019), 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition, #1, p. 22. Because the three volumes are not paginated, I will give, in the following, the issue number and the number of the page, counted from the first page after the original title page.

5 Ibid., *Promethea*, #1, p. 22.

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followed her in the 1920s and 30s (#6). After that, in the late 1930s, the comic artist William Woolcott turned himself into a female Promethea and, in her body, had a relationship with a man (#7). The comic writer Steve Shelley then wrote – with her consent – about his wife Barbara as Promethea and thus made her the last Promethea before Sophie Bangs, the main character of the comic series.

This part of the story is located in an alternate New York in 1999. College student Sophie Bangs is writing a term paper on Promethea and is fascinated by the history of the myth. In connection with her research, she visits Barbara Shelley, the widow of comic writer Steve Shelley. On her way back, Sophie is attacked by a demonic figure. She is saved by Barbara, who has turned into Promethea. Because her powers dwindle after being injured by the demon, Barbara explains to Sophie how she can become Promethea herself: by writing a poem about Promethea.[6] Sophie transforms into Promethea for the first time, and the story unfolds. She learns that it is her mission to end the material world, all suffering, and lead humans into the freedom of Immateria, the world of imagination.[7] Sophie/Promethea must fight demons who want to kill her to prevent her from bringing about the end of the material world; powerful people are threatened by Promethea since they do not want to lose the power they have solely in the material world.[8] When Barbara succumbs to her injuries, Sophie learns magic from magician Jack Faust and, thus prepared, undertakes a journey into Immateria to find Barbara there. In Immateria, she meets both Barbara and the other incarnations of Promethea: Anna, Margie, Margaret, Grace, and Bill, whose stories are told respectively. Sophie/Promethea's journey through Immateria is taken as an occasion for detailed explanations of various esoteric contents, which soon superimpose themselves on the story of the mythical figure Promethea. In the end, Sophie succeeds in bringing the apocalypse over the material world.[9]

The comic introduces Promethea as "the personification of Imagination."[10] The main character's name was not chosen randomly, of course. At its core, Promethea is about human agency and how realities can emerge from *aisthetic* (in the sense of *aisthesis*, i. e., sensual perception) reference to the world. In the poem that transforms her into Promethea for the first time, Sophie references Promethean agency in the first stanza: "I am Promethea and take my name |

6 Ibid., *Promethea*, #1, p. 23.
7 Ibid., *Promethea*, #5, p. 16.
8 Ibid., *Promethea*, #5, p. 17.
9 Ibid., *Promethea*, #28, p. 32.
10 Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008), 34; see, especially, Alan Moore, J. H. Williams, Mick Gray and Jeromy Cox et al., *Promethea: Book Three* (Burbank CA: DC Comics, 2020), 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition, #31, p. 6.

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From he bound to a rock and plagued by birds. | In me burns his Celestial stolen flame. | I am the words made flesh; and the flesh made words."[11] While the main body of the poem deals with the story of Promethea and her existence as an insubstantial living history, it ends with another reference to Prometheus: "I bring you fire!"[12] Later, Bill/Promethea again directly references Prometheus, followed by an almost page-sized image of the bound Prometheus:

> […] You're Promethea now. You're supposed to bring the light of pure spirit down to free earthbound humanity. To do that, I guess you have to love humanity first. But remember, you're not the first to try touching the mortal clay with the flame of the immortal soul. You're not the first fire-bringer. Did you ever wonder why our heroine's father chose that particular name for his only daughter?[13]

However close the reference is to Prometheus, Promethea's role as described in Moore's comic is different from Prometheus'. While Promethea is also a friend of humanity (evidenced by the comic's reference to the reading of philanthropic Prometheus), her friendship to humanity is revealed precisely in her mission to bring about the apocalypse and, by this, dissolve the boundary between the material and immaterial worlds, or better: to show the permeability between the material and immaterial worlds. In Prometheus' gifts to humanity – civilization, temporality, progress – the misery of humanity is identified. Based on this insight, Promethea's mission is to destroy Prometheus' gifts. In ending the material world, her Promethean qualities come to light, for apocalypse here does not mean the end of the world, but rather "revelation. […] Here, the end of the world involves not its physical destruction, but a global spiritual awakening to the nature of divine love."[14] Hoff Kraemer and Winslade interpret the apocalypse primarily as a change in consciousness: "Although Promethea does end the world, she does not do it on a physical level; rather, her apocalypse is the paradigm-shattering experience that all of being is interconnected, interdependent, and ultimately one."[15] This is the reason why the apocalypse itself does not seem to change the appearance of the fictional world. In fact, the comic shows how most people continue to live their lives as they did before, as Sophie explains: "Everybody had the revelation, but not everybody understood it, or took any

11 Moore, Williams, Gray, Vess and Villarrubia, *Promethea*, #1, p. 24.
12 Ibid., *Promethea*, #1, p. 28.
13 Ibid., *Promethea*, #7, p. 19–20.
14 Christine Hoff Kraemer, "The Undying Fire: Erotic Love as Divine Grace in *Promethea*," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore*, eds. Todd A. Comer and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 155; see also Di Liddo, *Alan Moore*, 99.
15 Christine Hoff Kraemer and Jason L. Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind': Alan Moore's *Promethea* and the Transformation of Consciousness Through Comics," in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, eds. A. D. Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 286.

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notice of it."[16] Moore thus refers to the original meaning of apocalypse "as an uncovering or revealing."[17] The authors of the comic also try to implement this revelation aesthetically, passing from a comic style of ink drawings to a "real world" style at the moment of the apocalypse.[18]

Medial Affordances of the Comic and Genre Reflection

So, it is up to Promethea to bring humanity the revelation about the materiality of the imagination and the imaginariness of the material. In the apocalypse she initiates, the order of time and space is deconstructed. This deconstruction is decisively based on the medial affordances of the comic. A side effect of the apocalypse, which is to reveal the inseparability of the material and immaterial world, is metalepsis, the transgression of the boundaries of different ontological levels, which the comic book uses frequently in the advent of the apocalypse.[19] Characters are suddenly unsure whether they are "real" or characters in a comic book,[20] as seen in the implicit reader's conversation with Promethea: "I thought I was somebody reading a comic book, or… No. That I was somebody *in* the book."[21]

This comes to a head in an illustration of the reader's thumb, an example of *mise en abyme*,[22] and in the depiction of the author Alan Moore and illustrator J. H. Williams working on the comic book itself in one of the panels.[23] Howell describes this as "textual apocalypse": "the ultimate destruction of the reader's sense of existing outside the world of the text, we become the story."[24] While the apocalypse that Promethea brings upon the material world is presented as an apotheosis, the same is true of the textual apocalypse concerning the reader. Referencing Rosen, Hoff Kraemer and Winslade point to the collaboration between authors and recipients – how "[t]he very act of reading becomes a col-

16 Moore, Williams, Gray and Cox et al., *Promethea*, #31, p. 17.
17 Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, 34.
18 See J. H. Williams' comments on how he implemented Moore's ideas on this at the end of the 3rd volume of the Anniversary Edition (no pagination).
19 E.g., Moore, Williams, Gray and Cox et al., *Promethea*, #28, p. 10–11.
20 Ibid., *Promethea*, #29, p. 12.
21 Ibid., *Promethea*, #30, p. 7.
22 Ibid., *Promethea*, #30, p. 22; for a discussion of this panel see, e.g., Tracee L. Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore: *Promethea* as Literacy Narrative," *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 3 (2015): 391.
23 Moore, Williams, Gray and Cox et al., *Promethea*, #30, p. 23; for a discussion of these panels see, e.g., Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 392; Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, 36.
24 Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 392.

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laboration"[25] – when they depict the moment in which the comic's writers are themselves "caught" at their workplaces while they produce, in the form of a *mise en abyme*, the same page that the reader has just opened and are aware of this "being caught."

Numerous reflections accompany the many metalepses in Promethea on the media affordances of comics. A metafictional dialogue between Sophie and Barbara even ironically indicates the "divine qualities" of the comic medium because storytelling in pictures is the oldest form of storytelling – especially of religious content.[26] Finally, Promethea herself explains to the reader the medial affordances of the comic:

> It's also appropriate that I'm talking to you through the medium of a comic-strip story. Ideograms and hieroglyphic picture stories were our earliest written language, how we recorded our exploits and our fabulous imaginings. Words being the currency of our verbal 'left' brain, and images that of our pre-verbal 'right' brain, perhaps comic strip reading prompts both halves to work in unison?[27]

Here Moore's strategic thoughts on the didactic use of comics are reflected. The comic itself is not the account of a magical experience, Moore says, but the magical experience itself.[28] Moore sees writing comics as hypnosis, a kind of spell he casts over his readers[29]:

> As I see it, a successful story of any kind should be almost like hypnosis: You fascinate the reader with your first sentence, draw them in further with your second sentence and have them in a mild trance by the third. Then, being careful not to wake them, you carry them away up the back alleys of your narrative and when they are hopelessly lost within the story, having surrendered themselves to it, you do them terrible violence with a softball bat and then lead them whimpering to the exit on the last page. Believe me, they'll thank you for it. The important thing is that the reader should not wake up until you want them to, and the transitions between scenes are the weak points in the spell that you are attempting to cast over them.[30]

25 Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 287; see also Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, 37.

26 Alan Moore et al., *Promethea: Book Two* (Burbank CA: DC Comics, 2019), 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition, #15, p. 5; see also Di Liddo, *Alan Moore*, 98.

27 Moore, Williams, Gray and Cox et al., *Promethea*, #32, p. 28; for a discussion of this passage see Di Liddo, *Alan Moore*, 98.

28 Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 276.

29 Alan Moore, *Alan Moore's Writing for Comics, Writing for Comics 1* (Urbana, IL: Avatar, 2003), 17; for a discussion of this passage see Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 275.

30 Moore, *Alan Moore's Writing for Comics*, 16–17.

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The passage shows that Moore believes that the medium of comics can bring about a change in consciousness[31] and is thus the most appropriate medium for his "crash course in occult philosophy."[32]

Promethea as a Personification of Post-Promethean Intra-Active Agency?

Without wanting to suggest in the least, of course, that New Materialism has been a frame of reference for Moore in conceptualizing the comic book series, the idea of intra-active agency plays a significant role in *Promethea.* Promethea herself personifies agency, the dynamics of possible "reconfigurings of the world," the "material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted."[33] In this sense, the comic book series *Promethea* can be read as a story about the "materiality of imaginings and the imaginings of materiality"[34] and shows "materiality as iterative materialization."[35]

First, the comic positions itself against a form of representationalism as an aesthetic enactment of relationality.[36] Apparently, it refutes in a Baradian sense a dichotomy between "representations and entities to be represented."[37] With the figure of Promethea, who can manifest herself in the material world through creative acts, the comic develops a fascinating alternative to transitive Prometheism and modern dualistic thinking. While Prometheus' agency builds on binaries such as self and the other; creativity in the sense of creation, active world-making, and simultaneous world-domination; subject and object; and linear temporality personified, Promethea's female intra-active agency works to dissolve these binaries. Sophie Bangs/Promethea embodies describer and described, creator and creation, at the same time: she is a young literary scholar, poet, and a story. Her agency is transversal instead of transitive: she is not creating something as Prometheus does; she works on the dissolution of categories. The idea presented here can be compared to Barad's "notion of intra-actions" that

31 See, e.g., Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 277.
32 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Alan Moore's *Promethea:* Countercultural Gnosis and the End of the World," *Gnosis* 1, no. 1–2 (2016): 236.
33 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 818.
34 Cf. Karen Barad's Keynote for the Conference "Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches" entitled "What Flashes Up: Errant Wanderings/Wonderings: The Materiality of Imagining, the Imaginings of Materiality", as quoted above.
35 Karen Barad, "TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 413.
36 Cf. Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 803.
37 Ibid., 804.

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"constitutes a reworking of the traditional notion of causality"[38] and where "relations without preexisting relata" through "specific agential intra-actions" determine the boundaries of phenomena.[39]

The idea that agency starts unilaterally from a creator figure, who sings about a passive muse, is thus overturned in *Promethea* in a thought-provoking way. Kidder clearly shows how *Promethea* critically examines the artist's view of the muse and suggests ways in which the muse can free herself from the objectification and passivity of the male gaze.[40] While the poet Sennet projects his erotic fantasies onto Anna, who, according to his poem, becomes Promethea without consent, the comic book writer Steve projects his fantasies onto his wife Barbara with her consent. She actively incorporates her role as Promethea into her identity. Barbara ages with the knowledge that she is also Promethea and uses it for her own purposes.[41] In this respect, the agency in *Promethea* resembles that in Hélène Cixous's novel *Le livre de Promethea*, represented in Cixous's title. The meaning of the title oscillates between *genitivus subiectivus* and *genitivus obiectivus*,[42] and it remains unclear whether it is pointing at the book that Promethea has written or the book written about Promethea. Authorship here – as in Cixous's novel – is represented intra-actively, as a mattering between the describer and the described.[43]

Second, how the boundaries between fiction and reality and the material and the immaterial sphere are presented as permeable in *Promethea* can be described as an intra-active moment. Post-Promethean intra-active agency is characterized by this "undoing of space and time in favor of an absolute 'space-time of the imagination'"[44]: "The idea of circularity is here maintained and yet simultaneously disrupted in favor of the concept of a fluid, harmonious space-time where metafictional reflection once again is called for, and where imagination and artistic creation become apparent as mankind's most powerful resource […]."[45] The characteristics of the medium of comics and "the fact that narratives

38 Ibid., 815.

39 Ibid.; for a discussion of Barad's "intra-action" in light of Promethean agency see Heinritz, "Disruptive Innovation oder Design?," 60.

40 Orion U. Kidder, "Self-Conscious Sexuality in *Promethea*," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore*, eds. Todd A. Comer and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 155; see also Di Liddo, *Alan Moore*, 177.

41 Kidder, "Self-Conscious Sexuality in Promethea," 180–82; for a similar line of argumentation see Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 394.

42 Liedeke Plate, "'I Come from a Woman': Writing, Gender, and Authorship in Hélène Cixous's "The Book of Promethea"," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26, no. 2 (1996): 159.

43 For a discussion of post-Promethean intra-active agency in Hélène Cixous's novel *Le livre de Promethea*, see Heinritz, "Disruptive Innovation oder Design?"; see also Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 394.

44 Di Liddo, *Alan Moore*, 23.

45 Ibid., 24.

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appear as sequential actions on the space of the page, make the space-time connection even more palpable than it appears in the prose novel."[46]

The comic employs various aesthetic means in addition to explicit thematization to show how permeable the boundaries between the material and the immaterial are. One such example is the comic's way of playing with generic and medial boundaries and the dissolution of the panel structure: "As imagination transcends space and time, it cannot but go beyond the borders of panels and pages […]. The space of Immateria is a fluid, changing, perpetually evolving entity; its time seems eternally hanging."[47] This again appears to be a staging of Barad's agential realism, describing how the

> ongoing flow of agency through which "part" of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another "part" of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself. The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires Umeaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities.[48]

Promethea, as a figuration of imagination, personifies these agential possibilities. In the aesthetics of the comic, Immateria and the idea of intra-action are shown when the boundaries between the narrative units blur. This resolution culminates in the comic's final issue, #32, which can be turned into a large poster (the 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition includes the poster). Fischer calls this issue "one of the most formally innovative comics ever published," and in its psychedelic character, he recognizes borrowings from 1960s counterculture.[49] Without any panel structure, this last issue consists of full-page color structures whose only figurative representations are the drawings of Promethea in a different pose each time. The text surrounding them explains the intellectual-historical and philosophical basis for the comic.

The dissolution of the panel structure is accompanied by a metaleptic moment: the reader is to be drawn into the fictional world; the fourth wall is broken down, Promethea and the reader are both characters, and the comic producers become protagonists who look at the reader in fright. Creator and creation blur in metaleptic mode. Just as the material world unites with the immaterial world with Sophie Bangs and Promethea, in the process of reading here fiction and the reader's world are supposed to merge. In the panels already described, which show comic book writers Moore and Williams realizing, startled and caught, that

46 Ibid., 63.
47 Ibid., 89.
48 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 817.
49 Craig Fischer, "Charmageddon! Or the Day Aleister Crowley Wrote *Wonder Woman*," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, Spring (2005): 126.

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they are part of the comic they have created, readers are asked to question their understanding of reality. The metalepsis-induced shock of realizing one is a creation invites the reader to question the seemingly immovable boundaries between ontological levels.[50]

Third, the intra-active nature of the comic book Promethea seems to reveal itself in its reception. By dealing with the meaning of imagination itself and metaleptically addressing the reader directly, the comic book thematizes the reader's participation in the creation of the aesthetic experience. As Howell puts it: "*Promethea* is a story about story, and about our constant readerly participation in the construction of the tale(s)."[51] *Promethea* here fictionalizes the concept of "closure," the idea that readers constantly weave hints into a story as they read comics that "allows us to connect […] moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality."[52] This process happens in the space between two panels, the so-called "gutter,"[53] and is so essential that McCloud even states: "comics *is* closure."[54] There is no fixed origin or a fixed end product; only process and transformation are happening while reading the comic book.[55]

Despite the unusual conception of the comic book and the approaches to the design of an agency beyond dichotomies described above, *Promethea* cannot meet its claims. Contrary to attempts to deconstruct regimes of the patriarchal gaze, the comic remains within an overtly sexist mainstream aesthetic and speculates on the readers' scopophilia.[56] As Kidder puts it,

> [t]he desire to sexualize and objectify female sexuality – including lesbian or bisexual imagery – is the consistent factor here. The muse narratives offer one negative and one positive version of a situation in which a man projects a sexual fantasy onto a woman, but even in the positive example, the projection still happens. The book still fulfills the viewer's desire to look. That is not to say that there is something morally unacceptable about *Promethea*'s solution to the problem – consent *is* the difference between morally acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior. It is merely to suggest that this solution is acceptable within a mainstream comic book partly because it allows the projection to continue. This solution can function within the somewhat narrow set of requirements of an entertainment industry that is based in no small part on the spectacle of improbably

50 C.f., Liviu Lutas, "Metalepsis in Different Media," in *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 2: Intermedial Relations Among Multimodal Media*, ed. Lars Elleström (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
51 Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 385.
52 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 63, 67.
53 Ibid., 66.
54 Ibid., 67, italics in the original.
55 See, e.g., Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 278–79.
56 See, e.g., Kidder, "Self-Conscious Sexuality in Promethea," 177, 187–88.

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> beautiful bodies in violent and/or sexual situations. A solution that involved not looking at all would fall flat within that industry.[57]

It thus counteracts its ostensible agenda by using sexist and homophobic clichés that the comic purports to deconstruct.[58] Apart from that, as Hanegraaff convincingly argues, "Moore's evolutionist narrative […] is unapologetically Whiggish and ethnocentric."[59] This is another reason the comic cannot keep to its political-emancipatory agenda.

A second reason why the comic book *Promethea* ultimately fails to narrate intra-active agency lies in its conception of authorship. The demystification caused by reflections on the media and generic affordances of comics is accompanied by a renewed mystification, namely, of the singular, male, creative author Alan Moore. Hoff Kraemer and Winslade elaborate on how Moore's concept of creative imagination and aesthetic agency draws from the Romantic era, particularly his reception of Blake:

> For Moore, as for many of the Romantics, imagination is a divine attribute and a way to participate in the ongoing creation of the universe. Like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Moore dreams of a utopia achieved not through political revolution, but through a radical change in consciousness produced by art.[60]

This change, Hoff Kraemer and Winslade say, should also translate to the reader's world: "Moore seems to intend *Promethea* as a creative act that, like Sophie with her poem, pulls powerful forces of spiritual transformation into the everyday world of the reader."[61] This romantic idea of authorial creativity not only contradicts the idea of agency, which eludes to the dichotomy of active and passive, but also the conventions of the comic genre, which often assumes collective authorship.

Within the fiction, the metaleptic cameo appearances of Moore and Williams are related to the revelation that accompanies the apocalypse. The permeability of the reader's imagination and reality is playfully demonstrated here. But the revelation of the ideas, which turn out to be those of the real author Alan Moore,[62] is not completed, as Sophie explains after the apocalypse. This constellation clearly shows the appellative character of the comic: the reader is by no means supposed to participate intra-actively in the creation of the imagination. Instead, he is supposed to let Moore's thoughts become reality by taking them seriously. The figure Promethea may represent intra-active agency, but behind her operates

57 Ibid., 187.
58 Ibid., 177.
59 Hanegraaff, "Alan Moore's Promethea," 246.
60 Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 276.
61 Ibid.
62 See ibid., 277.

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the Promethean author and creator Alan Moore, who repeatedly shows his power clearly through metalepsis and self-referentiality. In Howell's words, this critical aspect can be summarized as follows: *Promethea* "is most certainly 'moore'."[63]

The aesthetic experiment thus turns out to be Alan Moore's didactic project.[64] Explicitly, he says that the framework of the superhero story was only meant to lure readers (a fact that disappointed many readers who were expecting a superhero story).[65] This is evident throughout the comic, not least through what Wolk calls "a lot of ungainly expository dialogue."[66] Just as Promethea's apocalypse is meant to bring about a change in human consciousness, Moore pursues the idea that authorial agency can bring about the consciousness of its readers.

Conclusion

The comic book series *Promethea* at its core is about the dynamic relationship between accessing the world, producing the world, and knowing about the world.[67] The construction and orientation of *Promethea* invite a reading against the backdrop of New Materialism. This parallel reading gives rise to interesting observations regarding the agency of the central figure Promethea. What is staged in *Promethea* is the Baradian "*performative* understanding of discursive practices," that "challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things."[68] *Promethea* is precisely about how one might conceive of a world beyond these dichotomies. Thus, the comic might be read as an attempt at an intra-active epistemology and its simultaneous staging. Reflection on the comic as a medium plays an important role here. However, it turns out that it is, in fact, merely a staging. Only in appearance does Moore abolish the dichotomy between active and passive; after all, he clearly sees himself as a creator who wants to "hypnotize" his readers. Moreover, the comic does not break with the representational conventions of mainstream comics regarding the male or heteronormative gaze on sexualized female or queer bodies. Thus, Promethea is only ostensibly a political-emancipatory text. The creator-muse dichotomy that the comic problematizes ultimately remains. Thus, the comic

63 Howell, "The Monstrous Alchemy of Alan Moore," 395.
64 Hanegraaff, "Alan Moore's Promethea," 236.
65 See for a discussion Hoff Kraemer and Winslade, "'The Magic Circus of the Mind'," 274.
66 Douglas Wolk, "Magic Comic Ride," *Salon.com*, July 1, 2005, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.salon.com/2005/07/01/promethea/.
67 Cf. Jan-Hendrik Passoth, "Hardware, Software, Runtime: Das Politische der (zumindest) dreifachen Materialität des Digitalen," *BEHEMOTH A Journal on Civilisation* 10, no. 1 (2017): 66.
68 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 802.

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Promethea is a mere representation of an idea without evolving the political potential of this idea. Nevertheless, the questions addressed here invite us to consider further the relationship between agency, creativity, and authorship from the perspective of New Materialism.

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Local Ecology of Textual Marks: Reading Arno Schmidt at the Threshold of the Human

Abstract
This paper analyzes properties of and relations between textual marks in Arno Schmidt's writing. It argues that a text is the place of quasi-tactile encounters with marks and letters that yield various degrees of resistance to reading. Conceiving of the relations between marks on the page as ecologies, the article asserts a connection between reading situations and constellations on the page. The *agencement* of reader and surroundings (as well as their immediate past) and the ecology of the marks in the text connect through the reader so that readers are subjected to interpretations rather than being conscious agents thereof.
Keywords: Arno Schmidt, textuality, posthumanism, New Materialism, textual marks

Introduction

In his 1951 post-apocalyptic novel *Schwarze Spiegel* (*Dark Mirrors*), Arno Schmidt imagines a world in which the two sole human survivors remain unaware of one another for years. While riding his bike through deserted German landscapes, flipping coins to determine which turns to take, the narrator recounts his quests for the essentials for survival and possible signs of other human beings. He records his daily life in diary-like fragments written in a highly idiosyncratic stream of consciousness. During his searches, he discovers abandoned buildings, forlorn areas, curious objects, dead bodies, and wild animals and engages with them in an intimate, investigative, or desperate, yet whimsical, manner. When he does meet and engage with the other survivor, he ends their initial shootout by outflanking her. After an initial phase of advances and cohabitation, however, the last humans part ways, relinquishing all hope for a future of humanity.

The narrator's voice engages, as is typical for Schmidt's writing, in often poetic and elaborate depictions and arguments, showcasing his sophistication and humor. The elements that stand out in almost all of Schmidt's prose, however, are the use of punctuation and unique layout. The beginning of *Schwarze Spiegel* reads as follows:

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(1. 5. 1960)
Lights ? (I raised myself on the pedals) – : – Nowhere. (So, same as always for the past five years).
But : the laconic moon along the crumbled road (grass and quitch have crept from the shoulders, breaking up the blacktop and leaving only two yards of pavement in the middle : that's enough for me !)
Push on : staring from the juniper, the peaked silver mask – so onward –[1]

Nature has taken back control over the deserted built environment, yet the text still speaks from an eminently human perspective, echoing the loneliness of the remnants. The narrator's idiosyncratic style thus reads as yet another element of an already abandoned world: a dialogue with lost souls. While quoting a wealth of literary and philosophical works, he writes as if taking stock of what remains of all human culture—which, considering the end, is striking:

Gone : She was gone ! Of course ! And I stood with bowed head as in a blue stone. Stupid face. Midst plants. In my right hand a box of matches.
Toward morning cloudworks arose (and rain showers). Fresh yellowsmoke wafted toward me : my stove ! So I left the wood and pushed onto the house : the last human being.
Once more head high : there he stood green in the bright red morningclouds. Frost in meadowscapes. And wind came up. Wind.[2]

1 Arno Schmidt, *Schwarze Spiegel*, in *Bargfelder Ausgabe* Group I (Volume 1), ed. Arno Schmidt Stiftung (Bargfeld, Zürich: Haffmans Verlag, 1987), 201; here quoted from the translation: Arno Schmidt, *Dark Mirrors*, in *Nobodaddy's Children*, trans. John E. Woods (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 179. All quotes from Schmidt's texts are quoted in keeping with the line-breaks in the printed editions to maintain layout effects. The German reads as follows:
(1. 5. 1960)
Lichter ? (ich hob mich auf den Pedalen) – : – Nirgends. (Also wie immer seit den fünf Jahren).
Aber : der lakonische Mond längs der zerbröckelten Straße (von den Rändern her haben Gras und Quecken die Teerdecke aufgebrochen, so dass nur in der Mitte noch zwei Meter Fahrbahn bleiben : das genügt ja für mich !)
Weiter treten : starrt die spitze Silberlarve aus m Wacholder – also weiter –

2 Schmidt, Schwarze Spiegel, 260; Schmidt, Dark Mirrors, 236. The German reads as follows:
Fort : Sie war fort ! Natürlich ! Und ich stand mit gedücktem Kopf wie in einem blauen Stein. Blödes Gesicht. Inmitten Pflanzen. In der Rechten ein Paket Streichhölzer.
Gegen Morgen kam Gewölk auf (und Regenschauer). Frischer gelber Rauch wehte mich an : mein Ofen ! So verließ ich den Wald und schob mich ans Haus : der letzte Mensch.
Noch einmal den Kopf hoch : da stand er grün in hellroten Morgenwolken. Reif in Wiesenstücken. Auch Wind kam auf. Wind.

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With the last word, *wind*, superseding the first word, *lights*, the turn from electricity to natural forces is complete. In German, the personal pronoun *he*, or *er*, the reference of which is not entirely clear, might refer to the woods, but could also be a self-ascription of the narrator: "the last human being"; only the woods fit the color descriptor and mark the spot where Lisa, the other last human, has ostensibly just disappeared. Yet the phrasing further suggests that the narrator disintegrates into the landscape.[3] *Once more*, he lifts his head, mourning his last potential companion—before the focus of the passage leaves him, trailing off into the meadows, with the wind blowing through them. With *wind*, positioned at the very end of the novel and marked by its repetition and as one-word sentence, a natural phenomenon has supplanted the artificial *lights*. This reading is corroborated by the otherwise rather unmotivated *But* in the first passage: he sees no *electric* lights, but the *moon* is shining.[4] In a way, the ubiquity and disseminating qualities of the wind outlive all human invention as if to favor pollination over sexual drive, self-regulating systems over instrumental reason, ecology over language. After all, this is, intradiegetically, not only an account of the last human: it is the last written text.

Encounters of text

At the same time, we are, of course, not left with wind but with the word for it. The mere existence of this text highlights, if only in light of the intradiegetic death of all humans, its own fictionality and the dependence of all text on reading. Taken (all-too) seriously, the self-conscious narrative, when read in its own setting, has no reader, no meaning, and no effect on the world. While a text need not explain its relation to the external world, the contrast of the narrator's account with the world that necessarily exists around it in order to be read is, in this case, stark. While we can read a text that claims to be the last written document on earth, our witnessing turns on itself: if it were not for the reader, the text would not only remain unread but would not exist in the sole form in which a text can become what it is. Only reading—the process in which the eyes move over the text while scanning, palpating the marks on the page—realizes the meaning that a text entails.

3 Cf. also, however, Sergej Rickenbacher and Martin Bartelmus, "Von einer Welt in die andere. Arno Schmidts literarische Ökologie in *Schwarze Spiegel* und *Die Gelehrtenrepublik*," in *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft der Arno-Schmidt-Leser* 2016, ed. Rainer Drewes, (Dillenburg: Edition M & N, 2016), 47, who read the "he" as a reference to the much-cited leviathan.

4 Cf. Boy Hinrichs, *Utopische Prosa als längeres Gedankenspiel: Untersuchungen zu Arno Schmidts Theorie der Modernen Literatur und ihrer Konkretisierung in "Schwarze Spiegel", "Die Gelehrtenrepublik" und "Kaff auch Mare Crisium"* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1986), 200.

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The situation-specific actualization and realization of the content of a text through reading, however, depends on a plethora of more or less circumstantial aspects. First of all, there is the token of the text, and with it the individual entity containing the text: the book, laptop, or eReader, but also the individual file. Setting aside differences between autographic and allographic works, each token comes with its material specificities. Some of those attributes, such as typography and margins, are contingent upon editions and versions. Others, like irregularities in print, stains, underlined passages and annotations, or library labels and stamps, pertain to each individual entity. The distinction between type and token cannot be translated seamlessly to digital texts, but a PDF can itself be annotated, or contain the scan of an annotated book, or the file can be corrupted. Moreover, the screen on which the text is read can be dirty or cracked, or it could reflect the light in a way that reading is inhibited. Aside from the condition of the medium displaying the text—and, thus, the accessibility and legibility of the marks 'themselves'—there are a great number of atmospheric conditions that need to be met: light, air, temperature, and sound influence reading; human readers have to be sufficiently nourished, which highlights effects of chemical and biological agents, such as caffeine, alcohol, or viruses, as well as malnutrition, which have a considerable impact on readers.[5] While this list might appear as trivial—or as deterring from what still is and has to be considered as the core of a text: its meaning—it might also provide a sense of the sheer number of elements that have to align in order for there to be communication, for sense to come about.[6]

Reading is bound to a medium, that is, an object in the world that displays the text for at least as long as it takes to read it and shields it from the noise within the medium. But reading also entails an encounter with the marks on the page. When we read, our eyes follow the lines on the page, turning the marks we encounter into sensible signs. This process is often imagined as if taking place in an experimental setting in which the object is pristine and the reader neutral. That kind of reading and that kind of text do not exist. In abstracting from tokens and situations, we claim something that, on the other side of the equation, we withdraw: an identity of a text and the experience thereof. While many agree that there are various valid, well-founded interpretations of the same text, and some

5 Cf. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), 41–47. In this passage, Jane Bennett links 'foodstuff' and humans in an assemblage and ascribes agency to food. While she goes beyond the claim made here, she also refers to the effects of specific foods on the mind and their dependence on context.

6 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sens*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 80, however, productively distinguishes between various kinds of 'sense effects' that rather complicate the mere occurrence of meaning: "In short, sense is always an effect. It is not an effect merely in the causal sense; it is also an effect in the sense of an 'optical effect' or a 'sound effect,' or, even better, a surface effect, a position effect, and a language effect."

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even claim that we all read a different text, the physical, material contact and context find little recognition. Finding a not too dissimilar instability to that of the reading situation, some textual critics, like Peter Shillingsburg and Jerome McGann, argue that what becomes the text is, in itself, unstable. The same could be said for the situation-specificity of reading. As N. Katherine Hayles phrases it, at least for elements like "color, font size and shape, and page placement": "To exclude these effects from the meaning of 'text' is to impoverish criticism by cutting it off from resources used to create artistic works. How can one find these effects in a text if 'text' has been defined so as to exclude them?"[7]

What I am interested in here, and what any scholarly investigation into text and textuality arguably has to concede, are the following: that there is a real and material object called 'the text' fixed on a carrier that is called 'the page' that yields its effects only when being read; that reader and text come together in a highly specific and volatile situation in which the conditions for reading are at least partially responsible for the fact and the direction of any interpretation taking place; that the reading situation, much like the writing situation, and with it everything situational that enters into the text, is structurally inaccessible to others and only partially accessible to readers and writers themselves; that, further still, in the moment in which text, conditions, and reader come together, the text exhibits resistances according to its own materiality on the page; and that those resistances, as opposed to the situation, can be ascertained to some degree.

Ecology of the mark

Just as books and laptops are objects that we encounter in the world, and caffeine and omega-3-acids influence our engagement with them, any text is a site of object encounters. The objects that readers encounter on the page, however, are instantly virtualized and turned into carriers of 'immaterial' meaning. Any yet, while a text might create a fictional world in our minds, it contains a world in itself, replete with its own ecology. One salient example of this lies in the passage quoted earlier, from the beginning of Schmidt's *Dark Mirrors:*

7 N. Katherine Hayles, "Translating Media. Why We Should Rethink Textuality," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (2003): 267. Cf. also Peter Shillingsburg, "Text as Matter, Concept, and Action," *Studies in Bibliography* 44 (1991): 38, who defends a more dynamic conception of textual criticism—in part against what he deems an internal contradiction in more recent conceptions of literary theory: "Editions continue to be published (and read) as if written works were stable, achievable, objective, tangible substances, though these are the very concepts about 'reality' that have been challenged by propositions [of new criticism and (post-) structuralism]."

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(1. 5. 1960)
Lights ? (I raised myself on the pedals) – : – Nowhere. (So, same as always for the past five years).

This passage is particularly interesting for its use of punctuation, above all the icon-like sequence of *dash*, *colon*, *dash*. In its use here, it gives us pause, in reading and in interpreting. We might simply read it as that, a pause in reading, perhaps as the time it might take for the biker to raise themselves on the pedals, to look.[8] How long would that movement take? Is there a translation of dash and colon to time units? Does the looking take as long as the reading? Or is it some version of morse code? Something about the colon might seem to equate both sides with one another, or to announce an exemplification of the first part through the second. The sameness of both dashes (aside from their position) might yield the effect of an echo—just like the gazes one might take to either side when standing on the pedals of a moving bike. Or should one read it as an actual icon: two tires and a saddle from above, or the pedals next to the frame as seen from behind? There might be many more ways to read this sequence of marks, among them ignorance and uncertainty. Yet as with all marks on a page (even those we filter out as noise), they yield an impact on the reader. Similar to what Deleuze calls optical or surface effects, this impact affects, just as Jane Bennett argues for the case of food, or as moods do, the rest of the text, but independently of the situation. At the very least, it broadens the scope of all plausible readings of punctuation marks and charges dash and colon with the potential to appear in various ways or to give pause.

Punctuation marks in general are difficult to define, and linguists debate about which category they fall into. They have clear functions, however, such as the separation performed by two commas surrounding *however* or the period at the end of this sentence. In general, one could say, the less punctuation marks bear on syntactical structures, the more various are their meanings and the more they merely structure the reading, which was their original function. Arno Schmidt himself writes, interested in how his readers interpret his use of punctuation:

> One mode of use deserves particular consideration, which is of importance in shorthand : you can stenograph with them [punctuation marks] ! somewhere, for instance, you can read the sentence :
> "Kää-te !" : – : She looked over : ?
> In the 'old style' there could instead have been written :

8 Boy Hinrichs, Utopische Prosa, 195, also reads it as a "Rundblick," as taking a view of the entire scene.

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He loudly called her name : "Käthe !" Just a few moments later, she had spotted him, looked over, and asked back : "What is it ? !"[9]

In Schmidt's own reading, punctuation marks lend themselves to something like shorthand. The marks cease to function with regard to the sentence structure and instead take on a graphical role. They also obtain or retain a certain performativity, which becomes palpable in their variability: none of the marks is used in the same way throughout the quotes given here, not even in Schmidt's reading. Yet what could be read as imprecision is an example of the situation-specificity of punctuation marks—and what renders them performative and connects to the material process of reading itself. This is connected to the argument above: as soon as textual marks appear on the page and are read, they exhibit resistance. They resist seamless interpretation—but not only with regard to their meaning; the material contact with the page is not always smooth: some aspects can be read more easily than others, and for countless reasons, only some of which pertain to the semiotic and semantic aspects or the reader's expectations. A most salient example for the written performative effect of punctuation marks can be found in yet another of Schmidt's texts, *Kühe in Halbtrauer* (*Cows in Mourning*), dating from 1987:

I savagely thrust my jaw forward; strode around to the handle; and gave it a forceful jerk – (full jerk; full=jerks thwack) – : ?. / – – : ? ? – / : !

: zzz=zzz=ZZZTTT – and the hmyes 'sound' send such a wicked whistle through the sultry silence, the tool vibrated so violently, that we first had to re=collect all our courage. / : "Thinnest piecest first, okay ? – " –

: – –. / : – – ! / : – – – : – ! ! ! –

My, it worked like a charm ! / Now, groaning softly, I heaved a weightier round log onto my (rusty) forearm – : "Careful !"[10]

9 Arno Schmidt, "Berechnungen," in *Bargfelder Ausgabe* Group III (Volume 3), ed. Arno Schmidt Stiftung (Bargfeld, Zürich: Haffmans Verlag, 1987), 103–4, my own translation. Jak wyżej – od razu cytowane strony?

10 Arno Schmidt, *Kühe in Halbtrauer*, in *Bargfelder Ausgabe* Group I (Volume 3), ed. Arno Schmidt Stiftung (Bargfeld, Zürich: Haffmans Verlag, 1987), 345, here quoted from the translation: Arno Schmidt, *Cows in Half Mourning*, in *The Collected Stories of Arno Schmidt*, trans. John E. Woods (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), 146. The German reads as follows:

Ich schob verwildert den Unterkiefer vor; schritt hinum zum Hebel; und ruckte machtvoll – (voll Macht; voll=macht Schrumm) – : ?. / – – : ? ? – / : !

: sss=SSS=SSSIII – und der naja'Klang' durchpfiff derart bös die feuchte Stille, der Apparat vibrierte derart heftig, dass wir doch erst erneut unsern Mut zusammennehmen mussten. / : "Erst die dünnsten Stangen, ja ? –" –

: – –. / : – – ! / : – – – : – ! ! ! –

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This passage gives an example of what the narrator of this short story depicts as the origin of sign language. Probing some moments in which the concept of meaning-making through gesturing might have been invented, he arrives at the conclusion that "it must have been two elderly men on a circular saw; after about 40 minutes."[11] However these marks are interpreted, the range of possibilities they allow for is limited by what can be called their performative affordances—or their ecology: the way they exert their function in the context of all other marks. Precisely because there is no evident prescribed meaning that the marks transport, they turn into gesture and movement. If these marks *can* turn into gesture and movement, then all marks must have this 'ability', just as in the case of drawings. What is more, this text enacts an invention of sign language *on paper*. The gestures that the text, pardon me, 'gestures to' have never been performed; they constitute no translations from gesture to marks but were translated from mind in or into the raw variability of the mark itself.[12] In an emphatic reading, they establish, similar to the staging of the 'last text' on the narrative level in *Dark Mirrors*, a focus on the text and the way the marks on the page function when, and only when, they are read. The ecology of the marks on the page is thus linked to the realization of something like a potential energy akin to the resistance that textual marks exhibit. Open in their directionality, the marks await performative realization on at least three levels.[13]

Firstly, any mark is visible on the page, and although the human capacity to read and process symbols verges on a 'blind' automatism (the fact that reading and viewing are almost mutually exclusive), every layer of the text requires a basis: the strokes, dots, and circles that we see as or that form into the larger marks, letters, or words.[14] Like the body of the text is embedded in a world beyond the page, every mark is shaped and stands in relation to all other marks on the page; the (constituents of) marks and letters are both codified enough to be recognizable through different typefaces and variable enough to take on very

Ei das ging ja scharmant ! / Schon hob ich, leicht ächzend, ein gewichtigeres Rundholz auf die (ungewohnten) Unterarme – : "Vorsicht !

11 "dass es zwei ältere Männer an der Kreissäge gewesen sein müssen; nach ungefähr 40 Minuten." (CS 337)

12 An analogous process would be the production of sounds from anatomic features, as Friedrich Kittler develops from Rilke's text *Ur-Geräusch* in: *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986), 71–72. Here, there is a subject, and it is writing, but it records nothing. Hence, the notation is as if it were hollowed out, and therefore 'pure', inventive notation.

13 I am currently working on the publication of my dissertation, which provides a longer investigation into similar aspects.

14 Cf. for this aspect, see also James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, *Traits*, Contours, *Orli*, and *Splendores:* Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Summer 1995), whose conception can likewise be retranslated to this level of text/page.

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different shapes. Our reading habits jump over those aspects immediately, but their shapes and relations of the page leave an impact on every reader, even before they understand them—*Garamond* vs. *Comic Sans*, or also different types of handwriting.

Secondly, the semantic units on the page have some 'weight', which becomes palpable in the moment of reading: their rhythm or sound—even if one doesn't hear or mouth them when reading—, their complexity, semantic fields, and affective potential, but also all these elements both by themselves and in their constellations. Due to the fact that the marks are constituted by other marks that only signify in their relation—and thus after being seen and yielding an impact—the underlying performativity of the mark is still at play when they signify.

Lastly, due to the fact that situational conditions have an effect on the physiological, cognitive, and affective constitution of the reader, which actively influences the reading, the material interaction with the text has to be considered primordial: it takes place both parallel to the reading and yet before the text fully unfolds on semiotic and semantic layers. In the moment of reading, there is an *agencement* that supersedes the subjective experience of reading which is grounded in the material encounter with the text and its material elements. At the same time, the ecology of the mark is parallel to or connects with the agencement of the reader in the world.

While the agencement cannot be sufficiently analyzed or partitioned, one of its parts always remains the same: the type of the text—which means not the ideal or absolute text, but the instance of what is written and set on the page, including the aspects that pertain to the different versions and editions of texts. Similar to the problem of phenomenological reduction, the effects of situation and token cannot be reduced; but the text remains in its hybrid stage between the material instance on the page and the performing via reading—and has to be regarded *up to* the point of the token-specific, unique encounter, as I hope to have shown above. To some degree, this is precisely what we already do when discussing texts: the fact that words afford differing readings is the very basis for close readings and criticism. Yet when the differences between readings are considered to be anchored on the level of semiotics or semantics, the entire aspect of the material and ecological encounter is foreclosed. On the contrary, however, one could rather say that the ecology of the text as an entity in the world and the ecology of the marks on the page communicate with one another *through* the reader. The reader is much more the point of culmination of a process that includes all circumstantial elements and everything that is pertinent to reading. It is not that the reader is the fully competent, conscious agent of their reading; their reading is happening to them on the basis of a plethora of interconnected aspects.

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Conclusion

The central claim of this article is not, then, that we read according to whatever we have eaten or that we cannot conquer fatigue. Yet the reverse side of the concept of *The Reader* that Benjamin Bennett introduces[15] is that there is not only a multitude of possible readings for each reader but also a restriction of all possible readings. Since readers do not know precisely what is acting on them while reading, what circumstances or ideologies they are subject to, we cannot know what effects the text elicits in them. Yet we still have to work with the text. All theoretical quarrels aside, this is precisely how we already treat text—in journals and seminars as well as in schools or the feuilleton, in pubs and between friends: we refer to a common basis. In practice, the problem is not this basis. We read and have an unswerving feeling of being right in our interpretations, even if our minds can appreciate different readings. We read and understand in a state of dependence on everything else that is true and accurate for us at the time of reading, from political opinions to empty stomachs, previous knowledge, and the propensities of readers—and we know that. The central claim of this article is that we need to understand each interpretation as the culmination of different communicating ecologies, not the more or less infallible product of a capable mind that actively filters, picks the relevant lexical meanings, and adduces references. Reading, understood as such, always presumes two complex agencements, both of which yield highly idiosyncratic results in the reader. Where they intersect, one relatively stable layer of material persists: the text in all its ecological and performative properties. It is at this level that the complexity of reading is situated.

Arno Schmidt imagines a world in which the last humans decide not to reproduce. They arguably part ways because there is no future for humanity even if they teach their children to live differently. To them, it is impossible to think of a different world; and even though their conclusions arise from different reasons, their questions and decisions mark the text as very timely. When, in Schmidt's post-apocalyptic narrative, wind blows through the meadows and supersedes all cultural production, the human mind is regarded as overcome. It is by the ap-

15 Benjamin Bennett, in *The Dark Side of Literacy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), argues that it is impossible "to locate 'reading' exactly in our immediate experience by using its ties to specific textual features." (26) He thus claims an instance he calls "The Reader", which "arises only when the question of reading is asked with sufficient insistence to require the positing of a vessel in which reading-as-such […] takes place.)" (29–30) Bennett analyzes a problem in reading not unlike the present; yet his solution differs greatly, for what the process of understanding that reading entails for him is tied to an infinite and untraceable process that infinitely diffuses reading—situated between intertextuality and close reading. In contrast, this account focuses on the material contact of eyes and marks on the page that occurs in any reading and not as much on the necessarily (and partially simultaneously) ensuing process of interpreting, along with re-reading and interrelating.

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preciation of agency in the mundane tasks, however, that we will have to realize the secondary nature of the role of the human in the world. Reading can be as mundane as a hobby, but it also defines our legal and political spheres. To acknowledge the various layers of impacts and influences that find their way into the reading of a text, including circumstances, proclivities, and ideologies—as well as working with the resistances of the text—might yield a different assessment of humanity, which is perhaps more necessary than ever before.

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Artificial corporealities for a posthuman future: deconstructing romantic love

Abstract
The parodic story *Sad End* by Patricia Esteban Erlés does not answer to reader expectations on several levels: both in terms of literary genre—playing with the combination of a classic romantic comedy film and a science-fiction storyline—and in terms of the gender binary system. Moving away from the long tradition in Western prospective literature of artificial women, this short fiction presents the non-human body as a figure of potentiality when it comes to imagining alternative subjectivities in Western culture. It also opens us to the possibility of seriously considering other entities—organic or not—as cognitive partners and collaborators in the formation of knowledge about the world.[1]
Keywords: Science fiction, Spanish Contemporary fiction, Patricia Esteban Erlés, feminist humor, subjectivity, agency

> What happens indeed when the traditional notion of the body
> as bound and specified entity explodes into
> a web of human and non-human components?[2]

Literature of the unusual and ideology

The work and activities carried out in recent years by the two main research groups on non-mimetic literature in Spain[3] show that we are living in a moment of great creativity with regard to women writers in Spanish language as far as literature of the unusual is concerned.

By 'narrative of the unusual' I mean non-realistic fiction like fantastic, gothic, horror and science fiction, or a combination of these genres. I prefer to distinguish between different kinds of narrative within this fiction writing. On the

1 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Great Britain: Polity Press, 2021), 142.
2 Ibid, 142.
3 Grupo de Estudios sobre lo Fantástico of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and Grupo de Estudios literarios y comparados de lo insólito y perspectivas de género of the Universidad de León.

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one hand, there is what David Roas calls 'fantastic literature', which, according to his definition, is realistic literature (since the world constructed in fiction reflects the reality in which the reader inhabits) in which a supernatural, impossible event happens, and in doing so forces us to reflect on reality and its limits. This questioning of what we understand as 'real' is inevitably accompanied by a disturbing, ominous effect.[4] As Roas puts it, when the impossible event does not provoke a conflict with the context in which it takes place, there is no fantastic effect. For example, fairy tales or fantasy as literary genres place us in a world different from our own, which functions according to its own rules, different from those that govern our reality. Slightly different is the case of magical realism: in this fictional world—similar to our own—real and supernatural events coexist without problems. Science fiction, on the other hand, "proposes narratives based on imaginative speculation, either from the realm of science and technology or from the social and human sciences."[5] López-Pellisa believes that it is possible in SF to give a rational explanation to extraordinary phenomena, and therein lies the difference between this genre and fantastic literature, fairy tales or fantasy.

Women writers of the unusual in the Spanish-speaking world are gaining an increasing presence in the literary field, and they do so by carrying out an interesting appropriation of the fantastic and related aesthetics, experimenting with forms and motifs inherited from tradition.[6] On the other hand, the frequent critical load of many of these literary creations of the unusual is striking.

The presence of this critical aspect in non-mimetic literature in general (and in fantastic literature in particular) is unquestionable today, despite the fact that both genres have traditionally been accused of lacking political commitment, even of escapism. Indeed, for a very long time Peninsular philological critics took it for granted that only realistic aesthetics could respond to the imperatives of social denouncement—an argument that has been used, in addition, to delegitimise the employment of other aesthetics and even to scorn them.[7]

In the 21st century, however, we can speak of a normalisation of the fantastic genre in Spain[8] and there is no longer any doubt about the potential of non-realist

4 David Roas, *Tras los límites de lo real. Una definición de lo fantástico* (Madrid: Páginas de espuma, 2011), 31.

5 Teresa López-Pellisa and Ricard Ruiz Garzón, "Introducción," in *Insólitas. Narradoras de lo fantástico en Latinoamérica y España*, eds. Teresa López-Pellisa and Ricard Ruiz Garzón (Madrid: Páginas de espuma, 2019), XV (my translation).

6 Anna Boccuti, "Modulaciones de lo insólito, subversión fantástica e ironía feminista: ¿una cuestión de género(s)?," *Orillas* 9 (2020): 151–76.

7 Alfons Gregori, "Fantástico e ideología: un malentendido que todavía nos acecha," *Fantástico e ideología*, monograph *Brumal. Research Journal on the Fantastic* VII (2019): 7–12.

8 According to Casas and Roas, the beginnings of this process can be traced back to the 1980s in Spain. *La realidad oculta. Cuentos fantástico españoles del siglo xx*, eds. Ana Casas and David Roas (Palencia: Menoscuarto, 2008).

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literature to highlight the ideological nature of our everyday life. In this sense, the destabilising function of the fantastic, capable of showing the inconsistencies of the status quo, is remarkable. The starting hypothesis for this research work is that many non-mimetic literary texts written by women in the last fifteen years seek to disturb us, and they do so by placing monstrous, surprising, inconceivable or maladjusted bodies at the centre of the plot—bodies that surprise us and raise new questions about the functioning of our social world.

Feminism and humour

The aim of these pages is to analyse and interpret the science fiction story "Sad End" by the Spanish writer Patricia Esteban Erlés in order to reflect on its ideological load. For the purposes of this paper, I understand 'ideological charge' as the questioning of the status quo, and especially the mechanisms of the gender system. In particular, I will focus on the use of humour as a particular tool for this purpose. Humour allows for innovative approaches to both gender issues and non-mimetic genres[9] and is a phenomenon that specialised critics consider to be of great relevance and which has not yet been studied with due attention.[10] Affect theory and posthuman feminism will be the theoretical framework of my work. I will dwell on how the use of two particular tolls, parody and irony, multiply the possible readings of this literary text.

First of all, I would like to highlight that the combination of comic and ominous issues has been an aesthetic wager frequently present in female Hispanic narratives of the unusual in the last two decades. These two categories, however, have been traditionally considered to be mutually exclusive in some humour theories.[11] Indeed, it is sometimes stated that what frightens us cannot make us laugh.[12] The short story *Sad End* shares both characteristics: it is amusing in the way it highlights the absurdity of internalised social norms, and at the same time it makes us uneasy. In this sense, it is a critical cultural product.

The feminist load of this SF story focuses on the social and cultural mechanisms that condition the functioning of sexualised bodies. Esteban Erlés uses

9 David Roas, "La monstruosidad femenina en las narradoras fantásticas españolas del siglo XXI," *Signa* 31 (2022a): 105–24.

10 Anna Boccuti, "Introducción," monograph *El humor y lo fantástico*, coord. Anna Boccuti, *Brumal. Research Journal on the Fantastic* 1 vol. VI (2018): 9–18.

11 This is not the case in theories about the fantastic genre, which has not lacked humour in its various forms since its origins and whose use has been accentuated since the mid-twentieth century. David Roas, "Entre la risa y la inquietud: la combinación de lo fantástico y el humor como vía de subversión de lo real," in *Fantástico y humor en la ficción española contemporánea*, eds. David Roas and Anna Boccuti (Madrid: Visor Libros, 2022b).

12 Nöel Carroll, *Humour: a Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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humour—and the distance it generates—to deconstruct such mechanisms. Nowadays, we are dealing with a generation of (self-)conscious female writers who take a critical look at our social reality in order to active the reader's defamiliarisation of the structural subjection of women and LGBTQI+ subjects, making it clear that there is no truth about gender outside a set of normative cultural fictions.[13] We can frame their creative works within the so-called fourth wave of feminism, given their yearning to redefine what is political through innovative literary figurations.[14]

Parodying romantic love

Let us remember that humour interacts very closely with social reality and that it has a historical character. Within the framework of the fourth wave of feminism(s), many creators of the unusual—both in literature and visual products—in different languages and cultural frames are looking for a revision of the gender imaginary. This is undoubtedly the case of most of Patricia Esteban Erlés' work. As we shall see later on, one of the potential tools for achieving this aim is to alter the hegemonic and emotional life script that is socially expected.

As I have already pointed out elsewhere,[15] in fictional plots—as well as in other discourses, according to the approaches of both Sara Ahmed[16] and Eva Illouz[17]—emotions act as rhetorical figures that articulate in an effective way certain values and ideas. My intention for this paper is to reflect on whether or not the emotions present in the story *Sad End* reproduce the hegemonic charge that our culture tends to attribute to them. Emotions have a performative character, as they can reinforce or question stereotypes about gender, class, race, sexuality, etc.

The theoretical context in which I situate this work is the affective turn in the fields of the humanities and social sciences, which can be synthesised as a project whose intention is to think about alternative ways of understanding affects, passions and emotions and to discuss both the different ways in which these three concepts can be understood and their influential role in the public sphere. One of the main contributions of the affective turn is undoubtedly that it requires us to

13 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo yonqui* (Barcelona: Espasa, 2008), 32.

14 This is what many female Hispanic writers declared during the series of meetings *Fantásticas e Insólitas* (2019–2022) at the Alcalá University, as well as often pointing out that they read each other.

15 Aránzazu Calderón Puerta, *Parias y resistentes. La guerra interminable según Almudena Grandes* (Madrid: Visor Libros, 2021).

16 Sara Ahmed, *La política cultural de las emociones* (México: UNAM, 2015 [2004]).

17 Eva Illouz, *El consumo de la utopía romántica. El amor y las contradicciones del capitalismo* (Buenos Aires: Katz editores, 2009 [1997]).

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review the concept of agency.[18] The interest in emotion appears long before the 21st century, but the affective turn seeks to recover for political action the link of emotions and affects with thought, as well as their close relationship with the body.[19]

For the analysis I develop here, I will draw mainly on contributions from the so-called 'critical strand' within the affective turn. Specifically, I draw on Sara Ahmed's books *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), as well as on *The Consumption of Romantic Utopia. Love and the contradictions of capitalism* (1997) by Eva Illouz (1997). Among others, I consider fundamental two basic ideas present in these studies and which, in my opinion, are strongly intertwined. On the one hand, Ahmed demonstrates the way in which the discourses to which we are exposed orient us towards a certain life script, showing it as a happiness object. A life script linked to romantic love, which, as Eva Illouz demonstrates, is one of the most frequent themes in globalised culture. Illouz shows to what extent romantic myths respond to the logic and values of late capitalism. Many cultural products offer a utopian experience of love that in theory erases gender issues or social class differences. This love utopia influences the way in which individuals conceive and understand their experiences in real life. According to this widespread imaginary, the romantic experience constitutes a sphere apart from everyday life, and it is linked to erotic passion. Because of their central position in the hegemonic ideology, I will pay special attention in these pages to the representation of two emotions, happiness and love.

The Promise of Happiness

Sad End tells the story of the relationship between a successful American actor in the golden years of Hollywood cinema and a mysterious woman who always wears a hat. As we discover later, she is in fact a robot whose switch is hidden in her head.

The two protagonists are referred to only as 'she' and 'he'. They seem to be characters representing the hegemonic heteronormative couple. The first reading confronts the reader with a text that, apparently, seems to reproduce all the

18 See, for example, Teresa Langle de Paz, *La urgencia de vivir. Teoría feminista de las emociones* (Madrid: Anthropos, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2018).

19 See, for example, Brian Massumi, "Autonomia afektu," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2013): 112–35; Ryszard Nycz, Anna Łebkowska and Agnieszka Dauksza, *Kultura afektu—afekty w kulturze. Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2015); Jo Labanyi, "Pensar los afectos" (Barcelona: CCCB, 15. 03. 2016): www.cccb.org/es/actividades/ficha/pensar-los-afectos/222935.

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stereotypes of romantic love that popular culture has been transmitting for decades. According to Illouz, although the presence of romantic love has been present in culture since ancient times, it is still one of the most recurrent issues today. Mass culture offers a whole range of motifs, images and narratives for romantic emotions, which match in a very surprising way with the dominant neoliberal ideology.[20]

The promise of happiness linked to romantic love according to Ahmed[21] seems to be fulfilled at every point in *Sad End*, which constitutes a particular recreation of classic American films. An innocent reading of Esteban Erlés' story would lead us to believe that we are dealing with a utopian representation of love, at least until the moment we discover that the female protagonist is not a human being. Indeed, most of the time we have the impression that the plot represents in a hyperbolical way every myth of romantic love:

1. *Soul mates.* This myth is built on the idea that real love consists of loving "the one and only" person. Both people are doomed to love each other forever. This idea is articulated, among others, at the following moment in *Sad End:*

> [W]hat can happen to anyone capable of being swept away by a sudden impulse, by the hunch that one suddenly feels at the revolving door of an old bookshop on seeing *someone, the only right someone, waiting for each of us mortals* on a pavement or in the next seat at the cinema.[22]

2. *Nothing is impossible for love.* The second myth refers to the idea that love is like a magical or divine force capable of overcoming all kinds of obstacles. Our protagonist couple does not have to face any kind of problems, material or otherwise. They should only avoid the temptation of infidelity because of their monogamy, but this does not seem to be a problem for them. The husband, an extremely attractive man, never opens any of the hundreds of love letters of his female admirers because he was "immune to the charm of any other woman."[23] The absolute complicity between the two of them keeps away the spectre of lovers, even when they are apart for long periods: "Telegrams arrived almost daily, letters of a love that knew how to be summed up in four words. Funny hats arrived like intimate jokes that only she would understand […]. He thought of her wherever he was."[24]

20 Illouz, *El consumo de la utopía romántica.*
21 Ahmed, *La promesa de la felicidad.*
22 Patricia Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," in *Las otras. Antología de mujeres artificiales*, ed. Teresa López-Pellisa (León: Eolas ediciones, 2018), 283, italics mine. All translations of the literary text are my own.
23 Ibid., 285.
24 Ibid., 287.

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3. *Eternal passion.* Another love myth refers to the conviction that, in a relationship, sexual passion can—and *should*, in fact—last forever. If this is not the case, then we are not talking about "true" love. However, this is not a problem for our fictional couple:

> When he was back from one of his trips, they used to listen to records on the old gramophone, they used to leave notes for each other inside the vases, on the mirrors, between the cushions of the divans. They would read barefoot on the rooftop some Russian classic rescued at a bargain price from a street stall, they made love.[25]

Even years later, sexual exclusivity is still a main characteristic of their relationship:

> [He w]as always back, and his remote beauty, which at times seemed lost forever for her, materialised at her side and he smelled exactly like his blue silk dressing gown. He never brought a different scent or played any other role than that of the man fascinated by the girl with the canotier.[26]

4. *Free will.* It is often claimed that love is the most intimate experience, being the result of our will and a personal choice. From this perspective, it seems to be alien to unconscious ideological aspects of social or cultural nature. Therefore, romantic love is often presented as a utopia of transgression.[27]

Apparently, there is no transgression in *Sad End.* On the contrary, the couple at the centre of the plot seems to represent hegemonic values. As in many other romantic cultural products, their relationship appears decontextualised from neither a social nor political framework. Their personal well-being and happiness represent, in fact, the idealised status quo, reinforcing it as a result. They occupy a hegemonic position, so they do not need to worry about issues of social justice, as inequalities do not directly concern them.

Indeed, the happiness of this particular married couple is due to the fact that they are unaware of any material need, given the actor's status as a wealthy man. They live in plenty, with expensive whims and eccentricities, served full-time by a group of servants whose faithfulness and discreetness are very important characteristics that make class differences invisible:

> There were just the two of them, and some ghostly and very efficient members of the service. The cook, two almost identical maids and the cat-like valet, all of them made sure that everything was clean, that there were always freshly cut flowers in the vases and that the delicious food appeared as if by magic on a perfect table, on time, and was taken away with millimetric accuracy.[28]

25 Ibid., 284.
26 Ibid., 288.
27 Illouz, *El consumo de la utopía romántica*, 20.
28 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 285.

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As we can see, the two protagonists seem immersed in an exclusive and magnificent world. They live in isolation, far from material, emotional or social concerns: "They felt they were the masters of the end of the world, neighbours of the clouds, the last inhabitants of a city that let them believe that only the two of them mattered."[29] This way, class differences are blurred and there is no explanation about the origin of such an immense wealth, which seems almost "magical."

It is not a coincidence that media representations of romantic love are so often linked to a life of luxury. So, we could go so far as to say that this SF story seems to be a utopia of non-transgression. However, the fact that the romantic relationship is between a human and a non-human being is in fact a transgression—as we shall see—even if the relationship reproduces a dominant normativity.

5. *And they lived happily ever after.* Another romantic myth is the conviction that all individual effort is put to an end with marriage, as the latter guarantees eternal happiness. This myth is especially important, as it seems to confirm the happy ending that culture usually attributes to heterosexual love: "The feeling of prolonged *reverie* that she often had was multiplying at every moment. She did not know whether all this was really happening to her or whether she was dreaming that it was happening to her."[30] However, it is no coincidence that the short story's title is *Sad End.* I will return to this aspect later on.

6. *The perfect equivalence.* This notion argues that mutual falling in love is true love's origin, regardless of the importance of other possible constitutive elements, such as intimacy, negotiation or engagement. The hyperbolic and idealised nature of romantic love's image throughout the literary text is the best example of this idea: "She woke up every morning knowing that on the other side of her sleep-tangled eyelashes would be, only for her, his eyes of an infinite blue that from time to time provoked an epidemic of librarian workers' suicides."[31]

When reading the text for the first time, the lack of even the slightest conflict within the marriage may be striking. They do not need to agree or negotiate anything. Their perfect concordance and agreement gives the impression of being almost "telepathic."

7. *Special moments.* According to Eva Illouz,[32] in late capitalism the rites of romance—those moments considered "special"—coexist with the experience of a more rational, utilitarian and laborious love. *Sad End* starts with a very well-known situation: a date, which of course includes a candlelit dinner and the gift

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 286.
32 Illouz, *El consumo de la utopía romántica.*

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of a ring: "He would pick her up to take her to dinner in a place where everything sparkled *like in a child's fairy tale.*"[33]

In the case of our popular Hollywood actor and his perfect wife, such romantic rites and scenarios follow one another for decades, and every time they meet again after a period apart is a "very special" moment: "A few years later, in search of the tranquillity they no longer had in the city, they moved to Europe, to old Scotland, where he had bought an almost ruined castle that he had restored. […] *The best moment of the day is when you wake up*, he used to tell her, before kissing her."[34]

In short, while we readers are unaware that the wife is not a human being but a technological artefact, we have the impression that the plot reproduces point by point the values that hegemonic culture attributes to romantic love and happiness, except those regarding offspring. In this apparently ideal relationship, the only drawback is the absence of biological reproduction: "They had no children, that was their misfortune, she thought, the only one she could record during the thirty years of complete happiness they spent together."[35]

Despite her frustrated motherhood—the only imperative of the heteropatriarchal paradigm that no artificial woman can fulfill[36]—the female protagonist seems completely happy, in spite of her total isolation from her peers and having no business of her own. She just waits and waits for her husband to come back from his work trips: "She would not leave home. She hardly went down in the leaded glass lift to get the mail downstairs."[37] This "angel in the house[']s]" absolute lack of autonomy does not seem to be an obstacle to happiness: it is rather the condition and essence of the latter. The wife spends her whole existence stuck indoors, as described in Scotland later on: "There were walls all around their castle, but neither that enclosure, nor the solitude almost imposed by the script mattered to her."[38] The story therefore reproduces the kind of domination and submission typical of heteronormative couples.

A hyperbolic representation of romantic love myths constitutes, in short, the first level of irony of this short fiction, including its title: *Sad End* is a parody of the happy end that traditionally closes so many fairy tales and, in general, romantic stories. It is related to the aforementioned myth that states that every conjugal relationship guarantees eternal happiness. The absence of one of the partners—he suddenly dies because of a heart attack—puts their happiness to an

33 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End", 283, italics mine.
34 Ibid., 286, italics in the original.
35 Ibid., 288.
36 Teresa López-Pellisa, "Prólogo" in *Las otras. Antología de mujeres artificiales*, ed. Teresa López-Pellisa (León: Eola ediciones, 2018), 10.
37 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 285.
38 Ibid., 286.

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end. One cannot consider this a happy end. But the apparent perfection of this couple's relationship seems to be quite irritating, anyway. Why?

A mockery of romantic love

As is now apparent, this short story by Esteban Erlés can be considered a collection of *clichés* about romantic love. In particular, it reminds us of those ideas about romantic love popularised in Western culture in many US films from the 1930s onwards. In fact, the plot reproduces the most common fictional scheme of Golden Era Hollywood comedies, including the chance encounter of the two main characters at the very beginning, who will eventually get married: "They met at the revolving door in an old Brooklyn bookshop. She was going in. He was coming out."[39]

The events take place in the 1930s or 1940s, and one of the main settings is New York:

> They used to look out of their bedroom's huge window to watch the skeletons of other buildings under construction, the beams full of workers perched on them for lunch, like birds. They admired the poignant ugliness of the metropolis rising up around them.[40]

Thanks to the intertextual and intermedia allusions, the text "quotes" an imaginary about the Big Apple that has been circulating from the beginning of the 20th century in well-known photography and films.

However, any idealisation of romantic love is put to an end when we find out that the female character is, in fact, a robot called Perfect Wife: an artificial woman and a market product. In the light of this new information, the intense and apparently perfect heteronormative relationship on which the plot focuses turns out to be nothing more than a simulacrum, a theatrical fiction starring two simulators. Therefore, the text's second level of irony lies in the derision of naturalised gender order by turning the story into a parody of the romantic comedies it quotes. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us:

> [P]arody becomes an opposition or contrast between texts. […] Parody, then, in its ironic "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony.[41]

39 Ibid., 281.
40 Ibid., 284–85.
41 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1985]), 32.

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The "exemplary" protagonist couple is therefore laughable because their love story is just a performance and the emotions involved an artifice. The male protagonist is, indeed, a very good actor since he has been playing a role in his own marriage for three decades. This is even more evident on a second reading of the story, which is full of winks to an attentive reader.

This love story is only fiction, a narration—whose discursive character is underlined—created and reproduced over and over again: "All his life [he] told at countless dinners, at parties, when invariably someone asked him how their story had begun"[42] how he had faced "one of the greatest moments of life, when every human being has the feeling of being about to jump into the void from the considerable height of a springboard. […] *I turned around and jumped*, he always said."[43]

The awareness of artifice makes us perceive as ridiculous the moments of narrative tension that seemed to us so "natural" in a previous reading. But now we know they are simply falsehoods: "It took him a long time to find her. He was desperate because of the thought that she might have gone out without been noticed. […] *I remember every word we said to each other when I finally saw her*, he repeated at dinner parties."[44] Remembering the lines is part of an actor's job.

The myth of love at first sight is parodied through this discourse known by heart, performed countless times to make it convincing:

> [he] masterfully staged, over and over again, every line of that story that made even the most cynical producer or the most resentful lesbian diva believe in love again, in everything that can happen to anyone who is capable of being swept away by a sudden impulse, by a hunch.[45]

Uniqueness and spontaneity of feelings are highlighted throughout the text with the words of an actor who is continually performing and the emotions of a woman (who, in fact, is not a flesh and blood one) programmed to feel them: "[He] could not avoid it, he confessed to her many times over the thirty years that followed. He could not avoid giving her unique objects, places and moments."[46] We now understand quite differently sentences such as: "He never brought a different scent or *played any other role* than that of the man fascinated by the girl with the canotier."[47]

As Hutcheon underlines, the pleasure of ironic parody depends on the degree to which the reader engages in the intertextual "leap." Parody involves encoding

42 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 281.
43 Ibid., italics in the original.
44 Ibid., 282, italics in the original.
45 Ibid., 283.
46 Ibid., 284.
47 Ibid., 288, italics mine.

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and decoding, an overlapping of two cultural texts in which the old one is incorporated into the new one.[48] Moreover, the new version involves a critical and generally pejorative revision of the parodied discourse.[49] Indeed, only those readers who are well acquainted with the referent—classic American comedy in this case—and are able to decode the ironic tone of its quotation will be able to enjoy the humorous load of this literary text.

Esteban Erlés also takes up the tradition in non-mimetic literatures, especially from the 19th century, in which "[f]emale ginoids or androids usually represent the ideal of femininity"[50] according to patriarchal patterns. This ideal is an anthropomorphic being programmed on the basis of explicit desires of the male subject thanks to a contract with the production company. According to this gender model, being a woman—and specifically a "perfect wife"—implies giving up one's own desires and autonomy, becoming isolated and subordinated. The ironic load, if decoded by the receiver, denaturalises such a hegemonic model.

Another implicit irony is the fact that the repetition of the protagonists' speeches and attitudes seems to be enough to turn their idyllic simulacrum into a social "truth." The empty mask is an easily recognisable model to the public, as it is accepted and institutionalised through culture and social interaction. This way, emotions—apparently the most intimate experience of the individual—become laughable: they are shown to be strongly conditioned by shared codes and accessible imaginaries.[51]

The artificial woman changes the meaning of both happiness and romantic love. There is a rupture of readers' expectations, both with respect to gender binarism and to the cinematographic/literary genre of classic romantic comedy by inserting the story in an unexpected context, that of SF, at the very last moment.

Is it a Sad End?

When her husband dies of a heart attack, our female robot seems to suffer the deepest of sorrows. The irony inherent in the title *Sad End* comes into full force when we discover that the perfect wife is so because, actually, she is not a human being. The widow's great sadness, as well as the other "extreme" emotions of the two protagonists during thirty years of living together, are then reread as part of a pre-established script. If the basis of theatrical acting is the ability to distinguish

48 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 33.
49 Ibid., 53.
50 López-Pellisa, "Prólogo," 17.
51 Illouz, *El consumo de la utopía romántica.*

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between fiction and reality, can we consider this a happy or an unhappy end? An answer to this question is not easy at all given the semantic contradiction that irony activates because of the characteristic polysemy of the latter.

We could consider that this is a love story with a "happy" end for the male character, as he has lived—and has even died—according to his own wishes. He is undoubtedly aware of the fictional character of his relationship. But one of the questions the text raises is: can a simulated, pre-planned relationship between a human being and a non-human being be truly satisfying?

And what about the inorganic woman? Can we affirm that she has been happy? Can a robot feel emotions? It is so, according to the text:

> [He] never mentioned in his phone calls the despair of his telegrams, as if it were another lover sending them. When he called her *he made her laugh out loud, in the same spontaneous way that his cable messages made her sob with a pure and uncontainable sadness.* She suffered every second they were apart and the eternal risk of a plane crash gripped her chest.[52]

The text's ironic contradiction lies in highlighting the fictional (i.e., falsified, false) character of the emotions and, at the same time, their naturalness both in the technological artefact and in the anthropomorphic subject. When talking about the female robot, we should consider that she cannot tell reality from fiction, as she is unaware of her own artificial condition. Hence the irony of the sentence: "She didn't know if all that was really happening to her or if she was dreaming that it was happening to her."[53]

As she is nothing more than a "disposable" product, the very existence of the female character is worthless. She "cannot live" without her partner (and consumer). Note that this idiom, linked to romantic love's myths, is literal in this case. It also suggests another possible interpretation of the short fiction's title. The mockery of the ideal of heteropatriarchal femininity is underlined in such literalness. Such a mockery is also emphasised when we find out that the most modern models of the Perfect Wife robot are improved because: "[t]he perfect wife herself would already be able to connect and disconnect daily, *as well as to switch off the central system the day her human partner's life would end.*"[54]

From body materialism's perspective, we can read this story as an excellent example of situated knowledge: thanks to the reproduction of concrete experiences in particular bodies, it helps us to map power relations,[55] making fun of them on the way. We witness the Perfect Wife's totally passive role from the very beginning, *both in action and narration* of her own life.

52 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 288, italics mine.
53 Ibid., 285.
54 Ibid., 291, italics mine.
55 Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 115.

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In this ideal of femininity, the female protagonist is ironically presented as a being with no past or identity: "It was hard for her to remember who she had been before this astonishingly handsome man appeared in her life […]. He did not seem intrigued, nor did he ask her about her past loves or her family."[56] In this exclusive relationship, waiting and isolation—as it has been already pointed out—are the main frame of her conjugal experience: "She waited there, in the stone fortress that they had had restored and which was their secret refuge, the one that only the two of them knew."[57]

The uncertain temporality[58] of the female body—an object of structural violence and potential murder—is very well shown in Esteban Erlés' text. Reification of women becomes literal as the female character is transformed into a mere commodity, designed for the husband's personal pleasure, who also decides on her end: "He had left in writing that he wished his perfect wife to come to his funeral *to mourn him like a real bereaved widow*. He also wished that, within a maximum of ten hours, she would be disconnected, disarticulated and returned to the company."[59]

In short, this SF story parodies the experience of a body marked by gender, which is reified and apparently without a subjectivity of its own. However, following the thesis of new feminist materialism, the text can be read in a more complex way since from this theoretical perspective "the body is not merely a biological given, or a social construction, but rather an ontological site of becoming."[60] Bodies, for Rosi Braidotti, are above all relational and affective: they affect and are affected by their exchanges with other bodies. Indeed, here bodies "are heterogeneous genetic and bacterial assemblages modulated by social and technological infrastructures."[61]

The limits between human and technological entities are questioned, a phenomenon very present in Esteban Erlés' story: how does the relationship established between machine and human change and affect each of its members? Or perhaps they are no longer two separate beings? Maybe we can even see the robot as a technological prosthesis of the protagonist? Then the questions about theatrical acting and the "spontaneity" of the experienced emotions change: where does fiction (the game, the performance) end and reality begin?[62] Could we

56 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 285.
57 Ibid., 287.
58 Gabriel Giorgi, *Formas comunes. Animalidad, cultura, biopolítica* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2014).
59 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 291–92, italics mine.
60 Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 113.
61 Ibid.
62 As Marta Segarra reminds us, there is only one word in English (*play*) and French (*jouer*) for both acting out and playing musical instruments. Marta Segarra, *Humanimales. Abrir las fronteras de lo humano* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2022).

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claim that the long interaction makes his emotions real to a certain point? And what about *her* emotions?

Such questions multiply at the very last sentence of the text, as it focuses our attention on a secondary character, the hairdresser, about whom it is stated that "[n]one of her functions included the expression of feelings."[63] She is a technical automaton who disconnects the female protagonist after the death of her husband, keeping her in good working condition for over thirty years. This explains her whole presence in the story.

Once all her duties have been fulfilled, the auxiliary robot "without great ceremony, would press the switch that would put an end to that strange game that had been pretending to be alive."[64] This sentence makes us think again about the problem raised before: whoever is aware of their acting—and, consequently, pretending—is capable of discriminating reality from fiction, as well as of his or her own role in both spheres. By explicitly affirming the self-awareness of the robot-hairdresser, the ending of the story brings the human/non-human (technological) binarism to an end. It seems to confirm that "thinking and the capacity to produce knowledge are not the exclusive prerogatives of humans. They are rather distributed across all living matter and replicated throughout self-organizing technological networks,"[65] reminding us that machines can learn by themselves. This way, intelligence, a quality we thought was only human, is extended to non-human beings.

As we see, this SF story recreates a new kind of subjectivity with a potential agency of its own, beyond anthropocentrism, arising from affective interaction and mutual influence between the organic and the inorganic. The flow of affects and the exchange of information—Haraway's (2016) idea of co-evolution—are central from this point of view. This way, the boundary between corporealities and subjectivities becomes blurred. Rather than two separate entities, we might consider this close collaboration as a kind of hybridity: an unforeseen and unpredictable space for becoming together.[66] However, for this cooperative existence to be beneficial for all parties involved, hierarchies must surely disappear.

63 Esteban Erlés, "Sad End," 291.
64 Ibid., 292.
65 Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 114.
66 Donna J. Haraway, *Seguir con el problema. Generar parentesco en el Chthuluceno* (Bilbao: Consonni, 2019 [2016]).

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Alternative subjectivities

As I have tried to show in this paper, *Sad End* is a parody that disrupts readers' expectations on several levels: both in terms of literary genre—playing with the combination of a classic romantic comedy film and a sci-fi storyline—and also in terms of the gender binary system.[67] Its feminist critique focuses on representing the emotions of happiness and romantic love, apparently with the baggage that culture usually attributes to them, and then deconstructing these hegemonic emotions by revealing them to be a mere theatrical spectacle for the social public. The repetition of a cultural code (like gender) as a mock drill underlines its arbitrary and artificial character, even though it is so easily recognisable to its audience. The promise of happiness and of heteropatriarchy goes up in smoke because of the unexpected ending of the story, which is a very sad one indeed.

Moving away from the long tradition in Western prospective literature about inorganic women, this short fiction by Patricia Esteban Erlés presents the artificial woman as a figure of potentiality when it comes to imagining alternative subjectivities to the traditional subject in Western culture. It also makes us consider seriously other entities—living or not—as cognitive partners and collaborators in the formation of knowledge about the world.[68]

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67 Humour allows for innovative approaches to both gender issues (in the framework of gender studies) and non-mimetic literary genres. See Boccuti, "Modulaciones de lo insólito, subversión fantástica e ironía feminista: ¿una cuestión de género(s)?," *Orillas* 9 (2020): 151–76.

68 Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 115.

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Cultural heritage of the German city of Wrocław (Breslau) in Marek Krajewski's crime novels in a posthumanist perspective

Abstract
Wrocław as a city with a complicated historical past and an ambiguous identity – often falsified depending on political needs – is undoubtedly a research challenge in the contemporary posthumanist discussion on cultural heritage. This city, with its Prussian past, which architecturally marked its presence in the urban space, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, became an attractive background for narratives in various literary works, and in Marek Krajewski's retro crime novels it gained the status of almost a co-hero of the action. The German Breslau from 1905–1934 that appears in the crime novels about Eberhard Mock functions not only as a fictional city (although with a vast number of detailed descriptions of old Wrocław and consumer articles that place the novel's action in a specific historical and social spacetime of this city), but also one that becomes a specific embodiment of evil – a literary "sin city," metaphorical Babylon, and finally the seat of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this context, there is a space for discussion on the agency of urban space, or even its domination in relation to the heroes of this literary city, which not only inspires, but sometimes even pushes its inhabitants to do evil deeds. Therefore, when changing the perspective of agency, it is worth re-examining the lively aspect of objects and places previously perceived as stable and unchanging. Thus, the authors of the paper intend to analyze the literary vision of the historical Wrocław (Breslau) embodied in Marek Krajewski's crime series about Eberhard Mock in the context of Karen Barad's posthumanist theories.
Keywords: posthumanist theories, the German Breslau (Wrocław), retro crime novels, literary "sin city", the literary vision of the cultural heritage

Introduction

The city of Wrocław (Breslau) has become the focal point of various forms of art including literature in its broad sense, and Marek Krajewski's crime novels about Eberhard Mock are no exception.[1] There are numerous grounds for which this

1 Descriptions of German Breslau relating to Mark Krajewski's crime novels are based on the article by Zofia Moros-Pałys, "Niemiecki Breslau w Kryminałach Marka Krajewskiego," in

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urban space with its rich cultural heritage makes the intrinsic setting of many books. At this moment, mention of merely the ones connected with Wrocław's past will be made. Namely, the city's German past was politically inconvenient to post-war "polonized" Wrocław, the discourse of which was nearly abandoned in the socialist times, and so mental images of the city had to be recreated. Another reason for Wroclaw's popularity in literature brings down to the omnipresent sense of alienation that haunted the newly arrived resettlers from the East, many whom feared for decades that the Germans would attempt to reclaim the so-called "Regained Territories," with their biggest city – Wrocław. As a result, generations of Poles struggled to establish their identity and Krajewski, a native of the city, was among them. Literary activity was a way to (re)create a sense of belonging to the new place. Among many literary and non-literary assets of Krajewski's Mock collection, there is one that deserves superior applause: His books helped to develop not only the writer's own identity but that of the reading audience as well, which but added to the unique cultural heritage of the metropolis. Equally unique, and highly intriguing, is the concept of agency used in Krajewski's literary series. This concept constitutes the inspiration for and the core of the following chapter, as it is the key to understanding the literary vision of the cultural heritage of historical Wrocław that found its place in the black series of Eberhard Mock. Hence, an analysis of the use of agency in question as well as its influence on Krajewski's perception of Wrocław's legacy substantialized in his novels form the most pivotal objectives of the paper. The methodology of the analysis is immersed in Karen Barad's posthumanist theories, which enable a rethink of non-human agency present in literature, poetry, and art. One of the most fundamental assumptions here is the necessity to move away from the anthropocentric point of view – which reserved agency to humans only – and adopt a new, posthumanist way of thinking. According to this approach, it is not only human beings who influence the surrounding world including monuments, architecture and various heritage sites, but also these elements "agentially" affect human beings. Thus, "[a]gency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. Nor does it merely entail resignification or other specific kinds of moves within a social geometry of antihumanism. Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has."[2] Besides, in rethinking the biological and lively aspects of the

Wroclove. Fenomen Kultury Europejskiej, ed. Monika Wolting and Marek Hałub (Wrocław: VIA NOVA, 2017), 185–92. The following study is enriched, among other things, by the depiction of this city as a cultural heritage in a posthumanist perspective.

2 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," in *Materialität Denken: Studienzur Technologischen Verkörperung – Hybride Artefakte, Posthumane Körper*, eds. Corinna Bath, Yvonne Bauer, Bettina Bock von Wülfingen, Angelika Saupe and Jutta Weber (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 211.

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analyzed (architectural and cultural) space that for centuries was seen as stable and unchangeable, it turns out that this space is not stable and unchangeable; on the contrary, it is unstable and changeable, which results precisely from the agency of its living and non-living elements, which mutually influence each other. In Marek Krajewski's series, quite often it is the urban space that dominates people and not the other way around. Finally, using the term "cultural heritage" the authors of the following study adopt an inclusive approach by Kenneth G. Willis,[3] who defines it as:

> [the] legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of society inherited from past generations. Physical artifacts include works of art, literature, music, archaeological and historical artifacts, as well as buildings, monuments, and historic places, whilst intangible attributes comprise social customs, traditions, and practices often grounded in aesthetic and spiritual beliefs and oral traditions. Intangible attributes along with physical artifacts characterize and identify the distinctiveness of a society.[4]

The discourse concentrates mostly on the physical artifacts, and especially on buildings, monuments, and historic places. Curiously, what is perhaps innovative in the case of Krajewski's crime novels in terms of cultural heritage is the fact it is the city itself that becomes the co-hero of the action.

Complex past: From German Breslau to Polish Wrocław

Wrocław as a city with a complicated historical past and an ambiguous identity – often falsified depending on political needs – is undoubtedly a research challenge in the contemporary posthumanist discussion on cultural heritage. This city, with its Prussian past, which architecturally marked its presence in the urban space, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, became an attractive background for narratives in various literary works. As mentioned above, in Marek Krajewski's retro crime novels it gained the status of even a co-protagonist of the action. The writer himself highlighted this fact in interviews and authorial meetings with the reading audience.[5] In this context a question arises about the reasons for the problematic identification of the inhabitants (including Krajewski) with the urban space of today's Polish Wrocław, which for over 200 years

3 Kenneth G. Willis, "The Use of Stated Preference Methods to Value Cultural Heritage," in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, vol. 2, ed. Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2014), 145.

4 All translations from Polish into English except the titles of Krajewski's books and a fragment of a song (see below) are ours, ZMP and ML.

5 Mariusz Czubaj, "Miasto Grzechu Breslau," Polityka (Nov. 4 2009), accessed Aug. 2, 2022, http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/paszporty/168273,1,rozmowa-z-markiem-krajewskim.read.

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belonged to the German state, and in fact to the Prussian state (from the time it was taken over by King Frederick II of Prussia Hohenzollern in the 18th century until 1945). That is why one can still admire the historical buildings of "Prussian architecture," including German Art Nouveau or German Modernism, standing out on the streets of this Silesian city. Nevertheless, these undoubtedly architecturally intriguing places testifying to the interpenetration of multicultural and multinational influences in the Silesian metropolis were at the same time a problematic element of the feeling of alienation for the Polish repatriates from the so-called "eastern territories" who settled there after World War II. For under the terms of the Potsdam Conference, Poland regained Wrocław (in the so-called "western territories") but, for example, lost Lviv. As a result of this new international order in post-war Europe, the process of expelling Germans from Wrocław (and other Polish territories) also took place, while abandoned houses and flats were settled by Poles from the East. The process of adaptation of the city and its space by the newcomers was accompanied by a sense of alienation or even hostility, intensified by the Prussian or foreign architecture and German-language street names or inscriptions on buildings. The political situation in Poland and Europe during the Cold War and the division into the communist countries of the Eastern Bloc and the Western Bloc did not make it any easier to familiarize the urban space of the recently German Breslau. Although the changes to the Polish-German border and the incorporation of Breslau into Poland were ratified by both German states, they were not entirely accepted by West Germany. There was therefore a fear that the buildings settled by repatriates from the East might once again fall into the hands of the German citizens who had lived there before the war. Particularly in the 1970s there were many Germans in Wrocław who threatened to reclaim their property and chase the new inhabitants away. As Anna Gemra sees it: "The Poles were still in Breslau as if they were guests, they were not at home; especially the people of the first generations were accompanied by a hidden fear that they would have to leave this place: for if they had been expelled from areas that had belonged to Poland for centuries, why should it not be done here, where they had been for a short time?"[6] It was not until the 1990s, after the fall of communism and the reunification of Germany, that the Polish-German border was officially confirmed and Wrocław was finally accepted as part of Poland.

The historical and political conditions in the years 1945–1989 also greatly hampered the spatial development and reconstruction of Wrocław, which after the war was almost completely ruined. It is estimated that 70% of the buildings

6 Anna Germa, "Eberhard Mock na Tropie: Breslau/Wrocław w Powieściach Marka Krajewskiego," in *Śląskie Pogranicza Kultur*, ed. Anna Gemra (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2012), 128.

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were destroyed.[7] As Piotr Kuroczyński rightly observes reflecting upon the Prussian architecture of the city after 1945, its cultural takeover by the newly arrived resettlers from the East was difficult, because this space evoked an unequivocal sense of alienation or even threat, since it was associated with its creators – the Germans responsible for war crimes. Thus, the process of identification of the new inhabitants of Wrocław with the settled streets and districts was disturbed, as the surroundings appeared to them as definitely unfriendly and alien. The post-war space of the destroyed city, therefore, had to be properly landscaped to allow the repatriates to "tame" the surroundings. Accordingly, the restoration of the city began with the Gothic architecture, which according to communist propaganda belonged to "Piast Wrocław."[8] Moreover, the urban fabric was "polonized" by removing Prussian monuments (e. g., the monument to Wilhelm I Hohenzollern) and replacing them with new ones, which could strengthen the "Polishness" of Wrocław (e. g., the monument to Bolesław Chrobry or to Aleksander Fredro, taken there from Lviv). Also, Prussian buildings, cemeteries, and inscriptions were removed. In this way, between 1945 and 1989, a peculiar mythology of the city as an ancient and eternally Polish territory was created, from which efforts were made to remove (literally and metaphorically) the politically inconvenient German past of the city. The aim of this strategy was to create a new form of spatial landscape, as well as a completely new landscape of memories. Because of these actions, new socialist realist buildings (e. g., tenements in Piłsudskiego Street) and socialist blocks of flats appeared in the following years. As Anna Gemra rightly points out:

> Polish Breslau was still in its infancy and, built on a foreign soil, still needed to be tamed: Polish names of streets, bridges, squares and buildings. The traces of the former inhabitants are still visible today, despite the widespread "re-naming" campaign, […] so many citizens of Wrocław from the younger generations may have experienced the feelings Krajewski spoke of in an online chat with readers. He stated namely:
> "[…] I lived in a kind of torn between officially propagated judgments about the eternal Polishness of Wrocław and ordinary everyday life, in which I kept discovering traces of the German past (e. g., names of German companies on sewer manholes, advertising slogans written in Gothic that appeared from under falling plaster). After many years it was still a somewhat foreign city. Foreign walls, foreign inscriptions, foreign speech in the houses."[9]

7 Piotr Kuroczyński, *Die Medalisierung der Stadt. Analoge und Digitale Stadtführer zur Stadt Breslau nach 1945* (Darmstadt: Wetzlar, 2011), 17.

8 Piotr Kuroczyński, *Architekturvermittlung im Gebauten und Medialen Raum. Internetbasierte und Print-Stadfuhrer zur Stadt Breslau (Wrocław) nach 1945* (Darmstadt: 2010), 44–45, accessed Feb. 2, 2022, https://tuprints.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/2086/5/Kuroczynski_Dissertationstext.pdf.

9 Germa, "Eberhard Mock na Tropie: Breslau/Wrocław w Powieściach Marka Krajewskiego," 127.

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Marek Krajewski and his literary city

The fate of the writer Marek Krajewski, who was born and grew up in Wrocław, and his attempt to "tame" the surrounding reality in post-war Wrocław, which according to communist propaganda was returned to the Polish native country as "Piast Wrocław," was an exemplary biography of many resettled Poles in the so-called "Regained Territories." As the writer admits, his lifelong fascination with old Wrocław does not only refer to the place where he was born, but is above all an attempt to find his own identity. In an interview with Mariusz Czubaj, the editor of *Polityka*, the writer emphasizes:

> As a little boy I liked to study old maps of my city. But I couldn't find topographical references to my family's history (my mother comes from the Eastern Borderlands, my father from outside Piotrków Trybunalski). Unlike people living in Greater Poland, for example, I cannot show someone a school building and say: This is where my great-grandfather studied. So, I was forced to identify with the place on my own. Hence, among other things, my obsession with Wrocław – discovering the history of a non-existent, destroyed city is also a way of searching for identity. A bit of archaeology, a bit of mythologizing.[10]

Nevertheless, for Krajewski his new "little homeland" with its convoluted historical past became a turning point in his professional life. At the same time, by restoring the memory of Breslau on the pages of crime novels about Eberhard Mock, which have enjoyed enormous popularity in Poland to this day, Krajewski has managed to create a new form of memoir landscape in literature related to the "taming" of the city's Prussian past and its Prussian architecture. As Kuroczyński rightly notes, "what is controversial [in Krajewski's novels] is the relocation of the action to urban architecture and the successful combination of the non-existent traces of the city's German identity with those still existing."[11] Besides, it is important to emphasize the fact that only since the 1990s in Poland has any public discourse on the German cultural past of Wrocław become possible and the common use of the city's German name, i. e., Breslau. Before that, as Andrzej Zawada emphatically points out, Wrocław functioned as a city with an "amputated" memory, covering up all traces of the German cultural heritage of the Silesian metropolis.[12]

10 Czubaj, "Miasto Grzechu Breslau."

11 Kuroczyński, *Architekturvermittlung im Gebauten und Medialen Raum. Internetbasierte und Print-Stadfuhrer zur Stadt Breslau (Wrocław) nach 1945*, 69. See also Dirk Kretzschmar, "Retrokryminał. Breslauals Erinnerungsort in den Kriminalromanen von Marek Krajewski," in *Stadt-Mord-Ordnung. Urbane Topographien des Verbrechens in der Kriminalliteratur aus Ost-und Mitteleuropa*, ed. Matteo Colombi (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 194–97).

12 Andrzej Zawada, *Bresław* (Wrocław: Ośrodek Kultury i Sztuki, 1996), 41–46.

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Marek Krajewski's literary oeuvre has been appreciated in Poland and abroad. Among the many awards received, the most notable one is the writer's significant distinction in 2006. He received the Award of the Mayor of the City of Wrocław for the promotion of the city "for masterly literary reconstruction of the atmosphere of pre-war Wrocław and restoring the memory of the history of the city and its former residents."[13] In 2008, *Gazeta Wyborcza* granted the writer the title of the "Ambassador of Wrocław." In this context one might be tempted to say that the writer promotes his home city to this day, because in all his crime novels about Eberhard Mock the Pole remains faithful to his writing message, which is inextricably linked with Wrocław as he himself points out on many occasions, for example: "I am an author of books that belong […] to the genre called retro crime. I wanted to revive a very mysterious, unusual city with which I am closely connected […], namely Wrocław. A multicultural city with an unusual history, a convoluted history, and that was the reason why I started writing."[14]

More than twelve novels about crimes committed in historical Breslau have been published to date. The article's analysis will focus on selected ones, set primarily in the inter-war period 1918–1934 and before World War I in 1913. These are: *Śmierć w Breslau* (Eng. Death in Breslau, published in 1999, set in 1933/34); *Koniec świata w Breslau* (Eng. The End of the World in Breslau, published in 2003, set in 1927); *Widma w Mieście Breslau* (Eng. Phantoms of Breslau, published in 2005, set in 1919); *Dżuma w Breslau* (Eng. Plagues in Breslau, published in 2007, set in 1923–24); *Mock*, published in 2016, set mainly in 1913; and the last novel so far *Diabeł Stróż* (Eng. Devil Guardian, published in 2021, set in 1934).

It is worth mentioning that the series of novels about Eberhard Mock has undoubtedly won over a large group of readers, most of all because of the location of the action in a city with a complicated, mysterious, and ambiguous past. Despite numerous descriptions, the historical Wrocław presented in Marek Krajewski's crime novels is not a depiction of the historical city, but a literary adaptation of it. Hence, the confrontation of one's own images of the mysterious Breslau of the past with the fictional city presented in the specific genre of Marek Krajewski's crime novel (or to be more precise, a retro-crime novel) is doomed to failure and to provoke an unavoidable dissonance of thought. Breslau, as a co-hero of the black crime novel, has a specific role to play, imposed by this literary genre, namely that of a negative character who often contributes to the evil happening there. This is also the reason for numerous descriptions of dangerous places and buildings, as well as degenerate inhabitants, which suggest that "the

13 Moros-Pałys, "Niemiecki Breslau w Kryminałach Marka Krajewskiego," in *Wroclove. Fenomen Kultury Europejskiej*, ed. by Monika Wolting and Marek Hałub (Wrocław: VIA NOVA, 2017), 185–86.

14 Ibid., 191.

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city is saturated with negative emotions, evil, crime; (or) it even emanates hatred towards everything and everyone."[15] The publishers of the books about Eberhard Mock have taken care to provide an appropriate graphic setting, introducing readers to the specific atmosphere of a black crime story. Therefore, in literary criticism there are many comments on it, and they emphasize above all the magnetizing significance of the covers, of which:

> most is taken up by archival photographs depicting fragments of historical Wrocław. [At the same time] the whole thing is kept in dark, one would like to say, gloomy, colours […] Generally black and grey dominate, possibly with a touch of red – symbolizing blood. On the back cover there is a concise summary of the plot, lasting several sentences, which seals the profile of the novel. They mention (among other things) the "grim mystery"[16]

These notes, placed on the last pages or the covers, intentionally introduce the reader to the atmosphere of constant threat that comes with being in Breslau, that is a kind of "sin city" – a sinful and dangerous city, as evidenced by the following fragment of the note: "In the gloomy backstreets of pre-war Breslau, a city […] steeped in crime, there is a serial killer on the prowl, whose trail is followed by criminal counsellor Eberhard Mock. The victims are random people, and the perpetrator always leaves a calendar card next to the corpse."[17]

To make it easier for readers to orientate themselves topographically in the places presented, the author has deliberately included maps of old Wrocław in some parts of this crime series. In addition, at the end of the novel there is an index of topographical names, which enables partial reconstruction of the places of action in the contemporary space of the city (the novel *Mock* is an exception). The literary journey around the pre-war city is also facilitated by the frequently given and quite detailed descriptions of former Breslau, undoubtedly serving to create the realism of location and probability of events. German Breslau rarely appears on the pages of the novel as a cheerful, sun-drenched charming city, as, for example, in the fragment of *Death in Breslau*.[18] Instead, the descriptions of the urban space are dominated by images suggesting that the pre-war city is a "city of evil," a kind of Babylon or even a nest of Sodom and Gomorrah,[19] inhabited in large part by prostitutes, ruffians, thieves and other criminals

15 Germa, "Eberhard Mock na Tropie: Breslau/Wrocław w Powieściach Marka Krajewskiego," 138.

16 Bartłomiej Krupa, "Poetyka Powieści Marka Krajewskiego," in *Podteksty* 4, no. 6 (2008): 143–44.

17 Marek Krajewski, *Koniec Świata w Breslau* [The End of the World in Breslau] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2003), book cover.

18 Marek Krajewski, *Śmierć w Breslau* [Death in Breslau] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 1999), 19.

19 Ibid., 119–120.

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waiting for honest inhabitants in the numerous dark and dirty alleys, which define the city as "sly, cunning and tired."[20] This atmosphere is vividly characterized, for example, by the following quotation – a song of a Wrocław organ grinder from Phantoms of Breslau:

> In the city of Breslau after the war
> No longer safely can you all live.
> For a vampire prowls, a terrible brute,
> Like a spider, a bloody web does he weave […]
>
> The vampire kills in our dark city streets,
> Our officers strive to track the fiend down.
> Led by our brave Commissioner Mock,
> A hunt for the vampire runs through the town. […]
>
> With eyes gouged out whole, and hearts pierced with pins,
> This violent vampire's offering's grim,
> O, dear Commissioner, when is it ending,
> The vampire's fearful and terrible hymn?[21]

An unquestionable advantage of crime novels about Eberhard Mock is also an attempt to refer to the characteristic atmosphere of the interwar city by placing in the plot consumer goods of the period. For instance, the reader can find there the names of the beer from the breweries of Kipke or Haas and of the sausages from the Świdnicka Cellar from Dietrich's butcher's shop, which were well-known throughout the city. Then, the recipient will be taken to the famous department stores of Wertheim, Petersdorff and the Barasch brothers, and factories and production plants of, for example, Linke, Hofmann and Lauchhammer[22] They all unambiguously suggest that the novel's plot is set in a specific historical and social space of old Breslau. But this peripheral metropolis, as noted previously, also has its dark side. This additionally heightens the emotions of the protagonists, creating an atmosphere of great emotional tension accompanying the macabre crimes that are provoked by notorious places and buildings.

In the perception of the urban image of old Breslau, as many literary critics rightly point out, special role is also played by the narrative. For instance, Anna Gemra in her literary study of the crime stories of the Polish writer, clearly emphasizes "all aspects of ugliness: the aesthetics of turpism and gore […] descriptions of dirt, stench, macabre, physiology, decay, putrefaction, faeces,

20 Marek Krajewski, *Dżuma w Breslau* [Plagues in Breslau] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2007), 219; Marek Krajewski, *Widma w Mieście Breslau* [Phantoms of Breslau] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2005), 122, 175.

21 Marek Krajewski, *Phantoms of Breslau.* Translated by Danusia Stok. (London: Maclehose Press Quercus, 2011), 161–162.

22 Krajewski, *Śmierć w Breslau*, 14.

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corpses, wounds, physical disabilities and handicaps […] which appear in the context of Mock's investigations."[23] *Mock*, another crime novel in the Eberhard Mock series, slightly disturbs the previously presented image of pre-war Wrocław. This is because the city of Breslau also lived to see its charming places and corners, as well as its elegant and wealthy inhabitants.[24] Also the Old Town area, which in Marek Krajewski's earlier crime novels had mainly been the center of the criminal world and debauchery, has gained in this part of Mock's novel the big-city glamour of affluence and diligence of the city's solid craftsmen.[25] In addition, the city of Breslau was also known as a city of culture[26] thanks to the famous and frequently visited Concert Hall in Garten Street, which hosted operetta and classical music performances, bringing together the wealthy inhabitants of the place. The Silesian city can also boast a splendid swimming pool complex, which as a "magnificent sports and hygiene facility"[27] was admired by architects and aroused pride among the inhabitants of the pre-war city.

Let us now return to the fact that the Centennial Hall has become a co-character of the plot. But for this characteristic symbol of historical Breslau, the whole criminal plot presented in the novel would lose its sense. The monumental building hiding many mysteries inside encourages to uncover them and guarantees many unforgettable emotions. Nevertheless, the beautiful and architecturally masterfully constructed Centennial Hall appears, after the brutal murder of four middle school students, as the seat of Sodom heralding the religious and moral collapse of the city and its inhabitants.[28] In *Mock*, we also find characteristic macabre descriptions not only of the crime scene but also descriptions of the city's neglected backstreets, shabby restaurants, dodgy pubs and stuffy, damp and often smelly brothels. They almost completely dominated the urban image of Breslau in the earlier adventures of Eberhard Mock.[29]

(Post)humanist cultural heritage of German Wrocław

The German Breslau from 1913–1934 that appears in the crime novels about Eberhard Mock functions not only as a fictional city (although with a vast number of detailed descriptions of old Wrocław and consumer articles that place

23 Germa, "Eberhard Mock na Tropie: Breslau/Wrocław w Powieściach Marka Krajewskiego," 140.
24 Marek Krajewski, *Mock* (Kraków: Znak, 2016), 135–36.
25 Ibid., 120–21.
26 Ibid., 47.
27 Ibid., 91.
28 Ibid., 77.
29 Ibid., 32–36.

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the novel's action in a specific historical and social spacetime of this city), but also one that becomes a specific embodiment of evil – a literary "sin city," metaphorical Babylon, and finally the seat of Sodom and Gomorrah. At the same time, in this "sinful," "dangerous," and "steeped in crime" city (*Phantoms of Breslau* 2005), macabre crimes are committed in characteristic buildings of urban architecture that frighten the inhabitants, such as the tenement house Pod Gryfami (Under the Griffins) (*The End of the World in Breslau* 2003) or the concrete block of Hala Stulecia (the Centennial Hall), which is the embodiment of "mysterious and sinister power"[30] In this context, there is room for discussion on the agency of urban space, or even its domination in relation to the heroes of this literary city, which not only inspires, but sometimes even pushes its inhabitants to do evil deeds. This is mentioned, for example, by Anna Gemra who wonders:

> is it the people – evil, cruel, devoid of conscience and morality – who 'create' the city, degenerating it, or does the city – an unnatural, monstrous creation – 'devour' its inhabitants, turning them into people they would never be if they did not live here, and revealing their anti-human nature in the process? Or is it the case that in a great concentration of people, among whom, statistically speaking, there must be criminals, crimes by virtue of their accumulation in a relatively small area become more noticeable, giving the impression that we are dealing with a space in which murder and other criminal acts are natural? Or is it simply that cruel times create cruel people?[31]

Hence, it is necessary to consider whether the buildings mentioned earlier can provide evidence for the existence of a living aspect of objects and places – previously perceived as stable and unchangeable – and if so, whether this evidence stays in harmony with Karen Barad's posthumanist (non-anthropocentric) theory.

The Under the Griffins tenement house (*The End of the World in Breslau* 2003)

The first example supporting the above supposition is the notorious Pod Gryfami (Under the Griffins) tenement house, where a macabre murder took place. There, a random man was bricked up alive and sentenced to a slow and horrible death. But this beautiful Renaissance building on the city's main square had already filled people with inexplicable fear and apprehension, as can be seen in a con-

30 Ibid., 13.
31 Germa, "Eberhard Mock na Tropie: Breslau/Wrocław w Powieściach Marka Krajewskiego," 141.

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versation between criminal counsellor Mock and a Breslau-based medical doctor and astrologer:

> Let us return to bridge and the Under the Griffins tenement house […] let me hear […] – Mock interrupted him – about your fears of the Under the Griffins tenement house. – I saw it for the first time in a photograph – Völlinger moved his eyes over the pictures hanging on the walls, […] I was going to study medicine in Wrocław, and since I had never been there before, I wanted to find out more about the city. In a shop […] I looked through a photo album entitled *The Old Town in Wrocław*. When I saw the Under the Griffins tenement house, I felt a surge of panic […] and realised that I had often seen this house in a nightmarish dream […]. So when I saw this photograph, I felt such a penetrating fear that I abandoned even the idea of studying in this city. […] However, I spent the last two semesters [of my studies] in Breslau […] and I will never forget that dominating fear when I realized that I was standing under that accursed house. That's all, counsellor. I am simply afraid of this tenement house.[32]

The astrologer tries to explain his irrational fear of the Under the Griffins tenement house by metempsychosis, i. e., the wandering of the soul of the man who, in his opinion, killed himself falling from this tenement house, and who gives him terrible visions of this tragic death in nightmares.[33] However, as it turns out during the investigation, in the same tenement house in medieval times a certain unruly journeyman was walled up and tortured to death.[34] Although this is not a historically proven act of crime, it somehow fulfils its "purpose" being another example of the inexplicable influence of a building on its surroundings and the accumulation of criminal associations. However, in the case of the Under the Griffins tenement house, we can be tempted to say that the negative associations with this building do not apply unequivocally to all the inhabitants of Wrocław, as few opinions on this subject appear in the novel.

Centennial Hall (*Mock* 2016)

Looking at the history of the Centennial Hall, one might even put forward the thesis that it is the dominant protagonist of this crime novel about Eberhard Mock. The criminal plot begins with a description of this very building and the controversy surrounding its construction. The reader learns about subsequent architectural aspects and their philosophical and metaphysical impact on people, including the choice of this monumental Golem as a crime scene or several assassination attempts planned here (on Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1913

32 Krajewski, *Koniec Świata w Breslau*, 56–58.
33 Ibid., 58.
34 Ibid., 229.

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and on Joseph Stalin in 1947).[35] This testifies the agency of the Centennial Hall, the mentions of which accompany the reader from beginning to end in the retro crime story *Mock*. The agency provokes the protagonists of the plot to evil deeds and puts to the test the criminal counsellor Eberhard Mock, who, in order to find traces of the murderer, is forced to climb to the top of this colossal building overcoming his own fear of heights. The uniqueness of this building, with the religious-metaphysical meaning attributed to it, and its undeniable impact on its surroundings also become evident in the following fragments: The Centennial Hall "is huge and similar to the Roman Pantheon,"[36] but "Its sacred character is not obvious […]. Some consider it a Masonic or Theosophical temple like the tabernacle in honour of Goethe, i. e., the extraordinary […] Goetheanum in the Swiss Dornach"[37] It was built on the model of Catholic churches, for it has the typical "east-west axis as in medieval temples. […] The Breslau Hall illuminated by the rising sun makes as supernatural, powerful an impression as Goethe's temple"[38] It contains the ancient "golden ratio" discovered by Pythagoras and refers to the "golden number" (which is approximately 1.6), which was also confirmed in the Athenian Parthenon, the Roman Pantheon and "in creations of nature, if only such as the sunflower."[39] In its architectural conception, it combines spiritual elements together with the forces of nature, for "The top of the dome symbolizes the Father Spirit who sends his light to the earth, and this light flows through the ribs of the dome, especially through the four mighty apse arcades, symbols of the four elements."[40] In addition, this construction is described as "A magnificent temple of democracy, a cathedral of equality between people, which invites everyone to join, regardless of their condition – […] And on the other hand, it symbolizes the cosmic, eternal and sacred regularities of nature."[41] Nevertheless, the Centennial Hall can become an inspiration for the development of the "superhuman spirit" and reflect Nietzschean thought on the superman[42] or a "temple of death" in which people "sacrifice innocent boys."[43] In both cases, then, we face the exploitation of the peculiar potential of this building in the creation of both positive and negative human instincts, which can inspire innovative metaphysical discourses or ideological abuses (in the case of the pangermanist group) or induce sophisticated and bloody crimes. And it depends

35 Krajewski, *Mock*, 373–78.
36 Ibid., 12.
37 Ibid., 12.
38 Ibid., 12–13.
39 Ibid., 208–11.
40 Ibid., 29.
41 Ibid., 28–29.
42 Ibid., 209–10.
43 Ibid., 97–98.

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only on the individual perception of human whether the Centennial Hall will be for them an "architectural marvel" at which "one loses one's breath from admiration" or a "lofty temple forever splashed with blood."[44] What remains undeniable is that this monumental building hiding many mysteries inside invites one to discover them, regardless of the temporal perspective, certainly guaranteeing many unforgettable emotions, because: "It is truly extraordinary – […] Its expressive power instils anxiety even in the Polish communists. […] A decision was made to erect a one-hundred-metre steel spire in front of it. […] May this spire, this symbol of new Poland, […] visually cut in half the monument to Germanic pride and deprive the concrete block of its mysterious and sinister power."[45]

As can be seen, both the descriptions of the Centennial Hall and the tenement house Under the Griffins presented on the pages of the crime novels are literary examples supporting Karen Barad's theory of agency. First of all, it is not only humans who influence the architectural object in question, e. g., through the structure itself or the arrangement of the building, but also the object causally affects humans, e. g., pushing them towards crime. Besides, the analysed space is not stable and unchanging; on the contrary, it is unstable and changeable, which is precisely due to the causality of its living and non-living elements, which interact with each other.

However, the contemporary reception of the Under the Griffins tenement house and the Centennial Hall, as important elements of the architectural cultural heritage of historic Wroclaw, differs from their unique role in literary works, especially with regard to crime novels. Indeed, the medieval Under the Griffins tenement house (which was rebuilt in the Mannerist style under the direction of Friedrich Gross in the 16th century) is seen only as an interesting example of the historic buildings of Wrocław's Old Market Square distinguished by the rich sculptural decoration of the facade with images of griffins, lions and eagles (by Gerhard Hendrik). On the other hand, the Centennial Hall (the work of Max Berg, built in 1911–1913) as "an outstanding example of early Modernism and the innovative use of reinforced concrete structures in the building industry" and a building that is "a significant watershed in the history of Modern architecture"[46] was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2006. While significantly emphasizing the fact that "it played a significant role in the creation of a new technological solution of high aesthetic value, which became an important point of reference in the design of public spaces and in the further

44 Ibid., 355, 253.
45 Ibid., 12.
46 "Centennial Hall in Wrocław," UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed June 20, 2022, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1165/.

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evolution of this technology", hence it "occupies a key position in the evolution of methods of reinforcement used in architecture, and represents one of the climactic points in the history of the use of metal in structural consolidation" having "permanent compositional features."[47] The above characterization of Centennial Hall as a World Heritage Site thus fits in with anthropocentric perceptions of the creations of the human mind, for it primarily points to the permanent, unchanging and clearly defined nature of the structure, which contradicts Karen Barad's theories. Also in the contemporary perception of residents, the Centennial Hall, called "the pearl of Wroclaw modernism,"fulfills its well-defined architectural role as a "showcase of modern Lower Silesia and Wroclaw"[48] serving as a space for organizing various cultural, sports and business events.

Conclusion

The cultural heritage of German Wrocław (Breslau 1913–1934) in Marek Krajewski's crime stories looked at from the posthumanist perspective can certainly be perceived as a typical example of the domination of a decidedly sinister urban space over humans. This space proves its agential power by pushing people into various crimes, rendering the city a gloomy, perilous place. Even the criminal counsellor Eberhard Mock, the law enforcement officer pursuing criminals, is impacted by the criminal aura of this peculiar "city of evil," as he uses unconventional and brutal methods of interrogating criminals. Moreover, being a notorious alcoholic and brute, he rapes and beats his wife. Simultaneously, this cultural heritage of Breslau as an example of the negative domination of buildings over their inhabitants can be considered in the context of the process of diffraction, because among the heroes of Krajewski's crime novels, we can find people who do not yield to the pressure of the sinister surroundings and the "sinful life" of this "crime-soaked" city and who act almost honestly. Here we can mention, for example, the mother of a disabled boy, Ida Kretschmar, who at the cost of her own life defends her son (*Devil Guardian* 2021). Also Eberhard Mock seems to be "freeing" himself partly from the influence of the filthy and crime-ridden city when, exposing himself to ridicule and risking not only his career but also his life, he takes on the care of the disabled boy Rolf pursued by ruthless members of a secret society.[49] What remains unchanged, nonetheless, is the fact that thanks to posthumanist theories of agency, it has become possible to go

47 Ibid.
48 "Hala Stulecia." 2021, accessed June 20, 2022, https://halastulecia.pl/o-hali/.
49 Marek Krajewski, *Diabeł Stróż* [Devil Guardian] (Kraków: Znak, 2021), 147–153.

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beyond the usual patterns of the anthropocentric system of values, and thus to take a completely different look at the surrounding world.

However, this applies primarily to this literary space, appearing on the pages of novels of various kinds including retro crime novels in this discourse, in which a non-obvious view of the cultural heritage of Wroclaw is possible. For with regard to the contemporary perception of the architectural monuments of this city described earlier, namely, the Under the Griffins tenement house and the Centennial Hall, schematic and mentally established associations prevail, linking the buildings in question to their historical role and strictly defined social functions in a given urban space. Hence, there is a real need for reflection here or discussion concerning both a new look at the definition of cultural heritage[50] as well as its verification in relation to the activities of cultural institutions and organizations such as UNESCO, which determine and unequivocally categorize all elements of the cultural legacy of a given area.[51]

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50 See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 42 and Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2009), 109–10.

51 See Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 87; Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 25; Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), 186–87; and the AHD model description by Rodney Harrison, *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* (Manchester: University Press, 2009), 26–27.

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Ventriloquism re-appraised: Interrogating non-human agency through Satyajit Ray's short story "Bhuto"

Abstract
In the essay "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency," Albert Bandura argues that of all agencies, human agency is the power that majorly affects changes by one's action.[1] Ray's short story questions if what we understand as agency is exclusively ordained in the human realm, and if so, why does the 'human' abandon mindfulness in favour of mindlessness (in the pursuit of any enlightenment-based project). The text challenges what Jessica Riskin in her book *The restless Clock* opines as the "mechanical clock-work model of nature."[2] According to this model, only the human is so preponderantly bestowed with the idea of intelligibility – thereby relegating all other non-human entities in nature to a secondary position. Bhuto, in this aspect, stands out as a posthuman body and points to a post-dualist ontology. Human corporeality and consciousness is transferred into a puppet, and here the article attempts to bring out the posthumanist paradigms of the story. This relates to Haraway's notion of the onto-epistemic status of the cyborg as an agency where an organic brain and a non-organic (mechanical/robotic) body co-relate as a functional agentic being, albeit not human – a state of reality best summed up in Haraway's famous words – "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."[3] In an anthropocentric worldview, it is considered that only humans regulate non-human ontology as well as epistemology. Here, the article tries to decipher how the story challenges such a supremacist ideology and manifests a sense of human/non-human co-existence. Taking a cue from Latour's 'actant-rhyzome-ontology', the work also reveals the non-human puppet as an actant that regulates and affects the human actants – thereby dismantling human supremacy and rescuing non-human agency.
Keywords: Posthumanism, Bhuto, Agency, Ventriloquism, Actant-Rhyzome-Ontology

1 Albert Bandura, "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*1, no.2 (2006): 164.
2 Jessica Riksin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 14.
3 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,". In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 1.

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Posthumanism as a discipline attempts to interrogate the subject position of human beings from a radical standpoint. It tries to unravel the traditional human and non-human binary – thereby imagining the human-non-human relationship as always in flux and continuity. The posthumanist stance tries to expand ontology, subjectivity, agency, morality, ethics, and so forth – thereby questioning human centrality in the world of matter and being. In this paper, we attempt a critical analysis of these posthumanist issues and try to investigate the chauvinist human agency. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, in their book *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism*, defines posthumanism in three different ways, i.e., as more than humans, beyond humanity and transhuman upliftment through robotics and bio-engineering.[4] The posthumanist enterprise never remains locked or limited to the natural foundation of the human as given. In philosophical terms, it also seeks to look beyond the peripheral bounds of humanity as a set category that receives anthropocentric and anthropomorphic priority over and above other non-human categories. It also appropriates a certain transhumanist prioritization of technological and digital impetuses, which redefine the human in a variety of permutations and combinations. In this work, we try to imagine the world as a place consisting of more than humans – manifested by the puppet Bhuto. Here we do not speak of 'other than humans' because this sense of otherization has an embedded idea of inferiority on the part of the non-human. Thus, Bhuto here is not an inferior other than human but 'more than human' per se. We also try to look towards possible alternatives of human agency, thereby imagining a future beyond the exclusive focus on the human.

Satyajit Ray in his short story collection *Golpo 101*[5] uses his story telling and narrative capabilities to create a world of his own: his stories include "Mriganka babu-r Ghotona," "Kaktarua," "Asamanjababu-r Kukur," "Professor Hijibijbij," "Aschorjontu," "Anukul," "Professor Shonku O Kompu," and "Byomjatrir Diary." "Bhuto" also spills over the boundaries of the Other (animals and machines) and investigates what happens to human uniqueness when the Other threatens to trespass the line between the human and the Other. Here, by this other, we mean the object or the lifeless toy that can challenge or even intimidate the human. However, what we question in our paper is not the spill-over but rather the verity of this politicized boundary between the 'human' and the 'human other(s)'. From this vantage point of analysis, the normalization of this spill-over is not to be perceived as transgressive. The otherization of the Other from the 'human' subject, the critical identification of the human as necessarily

4 Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

5 Satyajit Ray, *Golpo 101* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001).

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the Subject and the non-acquiescence of the Subject and the Other as mutually internalized categories, is pointed out in order to be reworked so that the non-human is not bastardized as secondary or tertiary. Simultaneously, this re-working ensures that the human and the non-human do not become mutually exclusive categories that segregate or cancel each other out in a bid to favour anthropocentric presence and privilege.

Posthuman Agency in the Plot Configuration of "Bhuto"

The eponymous story "Bhuto" revolves around a puppet and two ventriloquists – namely Bhuto, an abbreviation of Bhutnath, Nabin and Akrur Chowdhury. Nabin, an aspiring ventriloquist, seeks tutelage from the master ventriloquist Akrur Chowdhury and is vehemently refused by the latter. This triggers vengeance in Nabin, and he learns the skill all by himself, creating his puppet Bhuto as a prototype of Akrur Chowdhury in order to humiliate him. However, this turns out to be fatal and Akrur Chowdhury, through his supernatural skills, transfers his own organic corporeality and human consciousness into Bhuto, thereby humiliating Nabin during his performances. Thus, Bhuto turns into a spectral nightmare for Nabin and blurs the human/non-human hierarchized binary. It is here that the work looks to investigate the importance of Bhuto's agency from a non-anthropocentric dimension. The supremacy of human cognition is contested in the story through Bhuto's witty replies and his use of language.

The story by Ray revolves around an artistic practice of ventriloquism. The ventriloquist, with the aid of their skills, provides a voice to the puppet, and the audience is fooled into believing that the puppet is conversing with the ventriloquist. In time, Nabin the ventriloquist learns the art and requests Adinath Pal to prepare his puppet as a prototype of Akrur Chowdhury. In this context the puppet seems highly contradictory to the central arguments of posthumanism. The puppet is created for Nabin's amusement and is also a manifestation of his avengement. Therefore, as Roland Barthes suggests, all the toys and puppets mean something. This meaning making is always in anthropocentric terms, and as Barthes claims, all the toys and puppets are a microcosm of the adult-world, being mere copied representations of the human objects.[6]

However, it is very interesting how a highly anthropocentric object interrogates the organic and inorganic mode of existence. Akrur Chowdhury, through the power of his magic, transfers his own consciousness into the puppet and starts humiliating Nabin in his stage performances. Thus, Nabin's vengeance and

6 Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 209.

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insults directed towards Akrur turn on him in a Frankensteinian way. The puppet created merely for frivolous amusement transforms into a spectral nightmare. Therefore, the puppet Bhuto seems to be a 'transitional object'.[7] The prototypical puppet representing another human figure is always tied to the idea of what it offers to the human world, and therefore it initiates the human's (here Akrur and Nabin) process of 'becoming' something, in this case an artist. But here the toy 'becomes' Akrur Chowdhury and interrogates human agency because an inanimate object becomes through its organic possibilities- an idea monopolized by the human.[8]

Through this idea, the toy 'becomes' Akrur and investigates the organic–inorganic binary. Here the binary is blurred by Bhuto's transformation into an organic living being. This is pointed out in the story when the puppet shows the signs of decay through his ageing hairs and dark circles under the eyes. This organic decaying can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it makes the organic-inorganic boundary fluid and integrates the inanimate object into the animate world. Secondly, the inanimate object always has this possibility of outlasting the animate human, if not destroyed by the latter. Therefore, it transcends the biological traits of the human – thereby invoking the sense of 'more than humans' opined by Cudworth and Hobden.[9]

The transference of Akrur's consciousness into the puppet can be interpreted in light of the major penchants of posthumanism. Nicole Anderson argues that posthumanism works predominantly in three ways, i. e., the transference of human consciousness into inanimate objects, human upliftment through bio-engineering such as *immortalism* and *extropianism* and what Catherine Waldby calls 'critical posthumanism', or what Francesca Ferrando calls philosophical posthumanism,[10] that tries to imagine a world that is not yet present and also not regulated by the doctrines of the present. In this regard, the future of techno-cultural productions is investigated. Here, the transference of human consciousness into an inanimate object is manifested through the puppet Bhuto: the puppet becomes a manifestation of artificial intelligence, or what David Wills would refer to as 'prosthetic consciousness'.[11] Put simply, Bhuto acquires the ability to exteriorize memory through his use of human language.

7 Jaques, *Children's Literature*, 209.
8 Ibid., 210.
9 Saikat Chakraborty, "The Velveteen Rabbit: A Posthumanist Manifesto." (Forthcoming).
10 Francesa Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 103.
11 Nicole Anderson, "Pre-And Posthuman Animals Animals: The Limits and Possibilities of Animal-Human Relations," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 23.

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Through this prosthetic consciousness, Bhuto critiques human agency – here asserting what we would like to call posthuman agency. Through this agency, Bhuto dismantles the human chauvinist agency – the vicious child of Enlightenment philosophy. Cartesian hubris forced the whole world into the thought that only humans are capable of rational thinking, and this gave the human a divine prescription based on an ideology that privileges them over all the non-humans, be they animate or inanimate. Thus, the agency of the inanimate toy puppet is only supposed to be regulated by the humans, but in this case the puppet starts regulating the ontology of Nabin. At first instance we find that Bhuto, due to his corporeal existence, has caught a cold and therefore his voice (which is supposed to be Nabin's voice in the performance) is not audible to the audience. Therefore, Nabin is not only insulted, but he must also give up his wages for the function. In another instance, Nabin, while performing his ventriloquism, realises that all the words uttered by Bhuto are not Nabin's own. Bhuto spells out difficult English words that are unknown to a school drop-out like Nabin. The most fascinating aspect of the text is a conversation between Nabin and Bhuto back at their home. Nabin asks Bhuto, "*aj Dinta bejay Gumot korche, na re Bhuto?*" [the weather today is intolerably humid, ain't it?], Bhuto answers "*Hun, Bejay Gumot.*" [yeah, too humid] However, when Nabin asks, "*esob ki ghotchey bolto Bhuto?*" [Bhuto, what's it all happening?] The puppet astonishingly replies "*Kormofol*" [Karma].[12] Therefore, Nabin's audacity of creating the miniature of Akrur starts to haunt him, and this is where the puppet takes control and re-asserts his own agency. So, the human supremacist agency through Bhuto's interrogation is not only critiqued but also regulated. This makes the human and non-human, the animate and the inanimate boundary even more fluid – thereby contributing to the central arguments of post-humanism.

Thus, in the story, the language that puts the human into a higher category is in itself an ephemeral category. Therefore, the idea of agency and subjectivity created through language is constantly interrogated in the story because Ray allows the puppet to have his own language within human parameters and to interrogate and investigate the centrality of human agency. David Wills in his book *Prosthesis* opines that language is the exteriorization of memory.[13] Here the puppet Bhuto is also seen to be exteriorizing memory through his usage of language and also wit. In a witty reply to Nabin, Bhuto exteriorizes Akrur's memory of the metro rail and uses an alliteration to equate *patal* (underground metro) with *haspatal* (hospital). The network of metro railways becomes an operation for Bhuto. He says, "*ekta birat operation, sara sohorer gaye chhuri*

12 Ray, *101*, 60.
13 Anderson, "Pre-And Posthuman Animals," 23.

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chholche, sohorer akhon-tokhon obostha." [a huge operation, the whole city is dissected with knives, its situation is very critical].[14] Therefore, we understand that, through exteriorization of memory, Bhuto questions human authority over language. He also critiques human endeavor to modernize the city through the establishment of metro railways. Modernity is also a vicious child of the Enlightenment that created a sharp gulf between the natural sciences and social sciences.[15] This gulf posited the human as an isolated entity from nature and negated the idea of what Haraway would call 'sympoiesis'.[16] This is why, Latour argues, we have never been modern because our idea of modernity has always taken us from the natural "oikonomia"[17] of co-existence. Thus, he says there is a huge contradiction at the heart of modernity: what he calls the 'great divide'.[18] Indeed, the idea of co-existence between nature and culture is lost through the insertion of modernity. Bhuto, through his exteriorization of memory, critiques this idea of modernity and challenges the isolated agency of the humans.

However, even after such argumentation regarding the investigation of human agency, there is no denying the fact that Bhuto's agential assertion into the human domain only comes true due to the magical skills of Akrur Chowdhury. Thus, Bhuto's agency is in a way dependent on the skills of Akrur Chowdhury. This is where a posthuman interpretation of the story becomes problematic as it does not mark a sharp break away from the 'human'. In this regard, Francesca Ferrando opines that posthumanism is a continuity, discontinuity and transcendence from humanism.[19]

The critique of human agency is mainly dealt with by giving language to Bhuto. Cary Wolfe in his book *What is Posthumanism?* argues that human agency and its dominance predominantly depends on the transference of neural networks into the network of signs, i. e., language.[20] Daniel Denett in his book *Kinds of Minds* argues that the idea of the res cogitans or the status of a being with a mind generally reinscribes the hierarchized binary where the human is given the privileged status.[21] According to Denett, our minds are different and supreme because of our abilities to offload our cognitive faculties onto our surroundings. Put simply, we create an archive (books, libraries, encyclopedia) through this

14 Ray, *101*, 56.
15 Cudworth and Hobden, *Emancipatory Project*, 105.
16 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.
17 Jacques Derrida, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?". Trans. Lawrence Venuti. *Critical Inquiry 27* (winter 2001): The university of Chicago: 174–200.
18 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans.Catherine Porter, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11.
19 Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 66.
20 Chakraborty, "The Velveteen Rabbit: A Posthumanist Manifesto." Forthcoming.
21 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 34.

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ability of off-loading. These archives represent around the world what we generally consider as 'our thinking'.[22] This archiving, according to Dennet, redeems us from our animal brains and directs us towards otherwise inexplicable and impossible metaphysical possibilities.[23] Now, the question is as follows: how do we construct this archive? The answer is through the primordial prosthesis i. e., language. We call language a primordial prosthesis because it can never represent 'our thinking', the purest form of Cartesian idealism. That is because, as Niklas Luhmann[24] argues, language can never replace the human mind as communication operates with reference to an unspecific state of mind. It is unspecific particularly regarding perception. Put simply, interpretation is always multiple and polyphonic and thereby does not create a final state of the mind. It can neither imitate nor express the human mind,[25] meaning language can never be considered a perfect representation of the mind as language is open to interpretations, and it is an arbitrary system that dwells on conventions and not on any final transcendental signified. On a different level, language in a communicative exchange is open to different interpretations – dependent on contexts, conventions, and traditions. If that be not the case, then the primordial prosthesis, also known as language, would become private, and we would not be able to offload our cognitive abilities. Thus, the ability of language to transpose our cognitive attributes into the surroundings is seen as an ephemeral ability.[26]

Thus, posthumanism as expressed in "Bhuto", despite its radical approach, is not free from the humanistic domain. Though it critically challenges humanist epistemes, it also puts forward a methodological problem. Posthumanism in "Bhuto", despite critiquing human centrality, does not free us from our anthropocentric views and inculcates another penchant of humanism called liberalism. Thus, humanism becomes much more liberal in its approach towards the non-human and includes more and more non-humans within the human imagination. However, this humanist approach does not investigate the human construction that is undertaking the approach. In this regard, Nicole Anderson argues, the posthuman precepts of transferring human consciousness into machines or biological upliftment through bioengineering and genetical developments, despite looking towards a future beyond human corporeality, privilege the notion of 'human'.[27] Therefore, what Catherine Waldby calls'critical posthumanism' does not entail such human privileging but argues instead for a future

22 Chakraborty, "The Velveteen Rabbit: A Posthumanist Manifesto." Forthcoming.
23 Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 34.
24 Ibid., 36.
25 Ibid., 35.
26 Chakraborty, "The Velveteen Rabbit: A Posthumanist Manifesto." Forthcoming.
27 Saikat Chakraborty, "Cthulhu and the snake: (Im)Possibility of Posthuman Ipseity," *Consortium* 1, no.2 (December 2021): 110.

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where the techno-cultural production is investigated. However, that form of posthumanism is also a way of 'naming' or 'labelling' and is perpetually tied with what it is 'post-ing'.[28] So, there is no denying the fact that Bhuto the doll and the story itself are created by human agency. Thus, as we will discuss, posthumanism in the story is not a complete negation of humanism. Instead, it is a re-engagement with humanism that challenges human centrality and its monopoly over language.

Critical commentary on Agency

As the critic Jonggab Kim posits, the traditional perception of agency as "the privilege of human consciousness"[29] has been time and again critiqued in the post-Anthropocene. Agentic capacity need not mean acting in an exclusive way to achieve one's own aspirations, as suggested by Stacy Alaimo in her book *Gender: Matter.*[30] Put simply, agency manifested through language is not an aspirational category. Ray's "Bhuto" re-strategizes this position of ascertaining agentic capacity, and anticipates well in advance with a critical prolepsis, refusing to acknowledge human ontological verity as an exclusive generative force. However, this deconstruction of the humanist legacy of agency doesn't absolve or neutralize the cataclysmic transformation of livable habitats that humans have brought about when it comes to what Diana Coole defines as "vertical or dualist ontologies."[31] Therefore, an anti-Manicheanism is clearly evident in Ray's "Bhuto," where a racialized hierarchy of speciesism is radically subverted. Bhuto convolutes the western classification model of humans versus the rest – illustrating through and through that such an opposition is unwarranted because it is not only oppressive but also untenable from a broader perspective of things. Individualism is not the prerogative of humans only, but in a cerebral, onto-epistemic and existential sense, non-human others also qualify as individuals and not merely as categories. But the matter doesn't end there. Ray also calls for the radical revision and reconsideration of agentic identity that entails in the reordered praxis of the Self-Other binary where Bhuto and Akrur Chowdhury both are self and the other at the same time. They merge into each other without

28 Anderson, "Pre- And Posthuman Animals," 23.
29 Jonggab Kim, "The problem of nonhuman agency and bodily intentionality in the Anthropocene," *Neohelicon* 47 (2020): 9.
30 Stacy Alaimo, *Gender: Matter.* Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillian Reference USA, 2017), 415.
31 Diana Coole, "Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41 (3), (2013): 461.

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any other viable boundaries. The binary of the Self and the Other in conventional postcolonial terms has been overtly polarised, which 'Bhuto' debunks and hauls up for question and critique. Ray's ideas would be more in sync with what Karen Barad calls 'agential realism' where 'intra-action(al)' operatives are never to be ruled out. In other words, the world is not an object of interpretation of human cognition. Instead, the world can exist without human intervention, or in other words, the world is independent of the human. Moreover, this epistemological configuration of the interface between agency and sentience is represented in an innovative fictive treatment in Ray's radical text by giving agency to a mere doll.[32] Monolithic subject positions are thereby abandoned and the viscosity, porousness and relationality of inter-species and inter-subject/object co-dependencies is highlighted in the process. While manifesting itself as a posthuman assemblage, any entity becomes subject to posthuman scrutiny, since generative activity does not qualify as the sole sign or marker or qualifier of agency.

Conclusion

The main reason why humans segregate their worth from non-human others and object-specific entities is because of the traditional perception that material entanglements or entanglements of materiality are not pure in essence. Human cognizance politicizes and distinguishes the human subject entirely from non-humans, citing the special possession or attribute of evolved cognizance. "Bhuto" not only critiques but also debunks the habitual tendency and conventional practice to cancel what we understand by relational empathy. Further, that relational empathy is extendable to inanimate bodies simultaneously bolsters the assertion that non-human and inanimate bodies have agency and identity that are acquired over time. While human culpability, involvement and responsibility are never totally absolved or evacuated, "Bhuto" is a scathing reminder that humans have to re-think their self-perception "as being ontologically different from nature, as spirit from matter."[33] Such a Manichean binary between the human and the non-human is not ontologically justified. Humans have failed innumerable times over and over in trying to justify non-human essence and materiality as non-agential to the extent of disregarding the blue planet as non-agential. Any given body is not agential or non-agential in itself but always with relation or non-relation to other bodies. It is this intricate mediation between agency and the affect – the Spinozian 'conatus' (endeavour to persist in its being)

32 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.

33 Kim, "The problem of nonhuman agency," 9.

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that makes Ray's "Bhuto" subvert the human monopoly over agency, question Cartesian dualism and critique modernity's internal contradiction in favour of a posthumanist non-human agentiality. "Bhuto" vividly exemplifies how materiality itself is autopoietic, intrinsically and expressly capable of impeding or accelerating 'the will and designs of humans' with properties and propensities that are unique to its own. The Enlightenment created a sharp divide between the rational and the irrational through the capacity of agency that is propounded by thinking. However, texts such as "Bhuto" talk about the agentiality of matter and show how agency is not monopolized by humans. In fact, agency in itself is not a final metaphysical conclusion and is subjected to interpretations. This is where the paper attempts to felicitate the multiplicity of agency beyond the humanistic boundaries.

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matterphorics of words and rubble

Abstract
This chapter explores matterphorical modes of sensing and writing matter: the rubble of the collapsed House of Wonders in Zanzibar and the words on Black Lives Matter protest banners. Rubble and words emerge as constituents of racializing assemblages that matter-forth racialized bodies and identities in unexpected ways. Sensing and writing matterphorically is to dissociate words from the representational function of language and to concept them, together with rubble, as material-discursive. We translate rubble and words matterphorically through each other, attending to the production of racialized bodies and the injustices and violences continuously emerging from it.
Keywords: matterphorics, race, void, matter, responsibility

Introduction – matterphorics

We begin by concepting[1] 'matterphor', 'matterphorics' and 'mattering-forth' with the help of the reading matters project initiated by Daniela Gandorfer and Zulaikha Ayub.

Whereas the concept "metaphor" is the trope of meaning transfer and substitution by means of analogy, matterphor denotes the articulation of meaning in relation to matter, understood not as fixed entity, but as constantly shifting (-phoric) and thereby establishing entanglements and relationalities. This changes not only how we conceive of the relation between meaning and matter, and consequently of knowledge production, but also presents a different way of doing theory.[2]

To us, matterphorics is a method of interpretation and not of representation. Interpretation, in turn, is constituted by the material-discursive practice of

1 Karen Barad, and Daniela Gandorfer, "Political Desirings: Yearnings for Mattering (,) differently," *Theory & Event* 24, no.1 (2021): 31.
2 Princeton University, *Reading Matters: Matterphorical,* 2018. https://readingmatters.princeton.edu/matterphorical.

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mattering-forth, of "working and constituting" instead of describing and representing. "For an interpretation is not just giving a reading, as it is constituting the thing as such."[3] With Donna Haraway[4] we can also concept mattering-forth as constituting and pulling the strings of a String Figure (SF),[5] where SF is the method of tracing and string-pulling, and simultaneously also the thing as such. Mattering-forth as string-figuring is, therefore, always a wor(l)ding practice that doesn't make statements about the world but brings forth wor(l)ds in their situated becoming. Strings matter and it matters who pulls which strings when and where. One of matterphorics' ethical imperatives is to do theory – or, as we prefer, to pull strings or to concept – from the wound outward.[6] Our concern is the wound of race: the production of racialized bodies and the injustices and violences continuously emerging from it.[7] This wound, in Scego's words, remains "unstitched" and "unhealed," an obliterated memory."[8]

We both encountered the open wound of race in (seemingly) empirically unrelated former research: one attending to the rubble of the collapsed House of Wonders in Zanzibar, the other to a Black Lives Matter protest in Germany. Our string figure constitutes itself through pulling strings of rubble and Black Lives Matter banners. The rubble and the banners have pulled us into attentiveness towards the manifold matterings of the wound of race and towards how it is continuously being covered up. It is this covering up – this avoidance of responsibility – that the rubble and the banners revolt against. We matter-forth this revolt through our conversation,[9] which is an iterative cutting together-apart[10] of

3 Elizabeth Povinelli, Daniela Gandorfer, and Zulaikha Ayub, "Mattering-Forth: Thinking-With Karrabing," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 311–312.

4 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, London: Duke University Press 2016).

5 "SF is a sign for science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures. Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before, of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth. String figures require holding still in order to receive and pass on. String figures can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained" (Haraway, *Trouble*, 10).

6 Eyal Weizman and Daniela Gandorfer, "Epilogue: Theory, Momentarily," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 399–410.

7 bell hooks, *Black Looks. Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge 2015); Patricia J. Williams, "Skittles as Matterphor," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 356–98.

8 Igiaba Scego, "Roma Suppressed," Trans. Lucy Rand 2020. Accessed September 7, 2022. https://www.litromagazine.com/usa/2020/04/rome-suppressed/.

9 The authors performed this conversation first as a presentation at the conference *Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches,* Warsaw, November 15, 2021.

10 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press 2007).

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mattering rubble and mattering words. You can trace *the bannered words through the italics*, the rubble through the normal font and **our attempts at translating them through one another in bold print.** In these encounters, we are concerned with language and its expression. Therefore, in translating words and rubble through each other, inspired by Karen Barad – as well as by Gender Studies scholars and activists – we attend to the practice of wording as entangled phenomena, consciously and proposedly choosing slashes, hyphens and square parentheses. We use the slash in Barad's way of concepting of poetics, that is to say to express an agential cut, a cutting together-apart instead of an absolute separation. "'Cutting together-apart' entails the enactment of an agential cut together with the entanglement of what's on 'either side' of the cut since these are produced in one move."[11] This is why the strings we pull are often worded with a slash as 'un/racialization', or 'in/determinacy'. We also use hyphenation ('re-member', 're-store' and so on), again inspired by Haraway, Barad and Gandorfer, in order to push us to pause within a word, to "walk around in a word or even a letter" because it "entails stories, different stories,"[12] different doings to be engaged with. Hyphens also help us to attend to the complexity of certain phenomena, like 'classifiable-in-order-to-be-governable', that, for us, have to be sensed in their entanglement. Finally, we use square parentheses to express our situatedness within the phenomenon, to express where we consciously string new elements into existing stories – elements that have, in our view, been mattering all along but might have remained un/languaged or un/worded so far. This is our way of attending to the practice of sensing and writing wor(l)ds. Readers may find their own way to pull the strings and to find new interpretations and openings that these wor(l)dings might allow for, which we have not included or anticipated here.

String 1 – encounters

"Ich will ein paar schöne, vielleicht auch verwundbare Schwarze Männer vorne sehen, die das Banner tragen, let's go Brüder!"[13] *Similar calls were repeated regularly at the BLM protest in Berlin, Germany, in 2021, calling for Black protesters to replace those who carried the banner before them. This banner moved exclusively via Black bodies to a crowd that shouts: Black African Lives MATTER,*

11 Karen Barad, Malou Juelskjær and Nete Schwennesen, "Intra-active Entanglements – An Interview with Karen Barad," *Kvinder, Køn og forskning/Women, Gender and Research*, 1 (2012): 20.

12 Barad and Gandorfer, "Political Desirings," 32.

13 "I want to see some beautiful maybe also vulnerable Black men in front who carry the banner. Let's go brothers!" (all translations by the authors).

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Black Trans Lives MATTER, Black lives MATTER. Entangled with, carried by, and carrying Black bodies, vulnerable Black bodies. BLACK LIVES MATTER on this banner is not just a slogan, not just words. "As if a word could be a word!"[14] *Black Lives Matter has been – and is being – brought forth by intra-actions of the most violent and deadly kind. Gandorfer and Ayub ask: "Who or what has ever encountered […] a concept, or even a word, that was not an entanglement of matter, history, forces, political and legal structures, chemical reactions, and physical intra-actions?"*[15] *Black bodies brought forth the slogan in its ongoing historicity. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three queer Black women activists, first spread the words 'Black Lives Matter' as a social media hashtag after the white police officer George Zimmerman went unsentenced after murdering Trayvon Martin in 2012. Black Lives Matter became "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (BLM, n.d.). Black bodies, dead and alive, are enfolded in matter, in the word matter, in the historicity of matter. The banner is charged with these words, with the touch of the Black protestors, with "language that has its own sweat."*[16] **And yet, the banner and how it matters is not determined solely by the words on it. Rather, it matters-forth in specific material discursive intra-actions, specific apparatuses.**

"Watu hulizwa na miji na majengo yao kama walizwavyo na watu wao. Majengo na miji kwetu ina roho, yavuta pumzi,"[17] my friend, the Zanzibari poet and journalist Mohammed Khelef Ghassani wrote to me on WhatsApp. It was Christmas morning 2020, and the Jumba la Maajabu, known as the House of Wonders, had just fallen, under the eyes – and the cameras – of the world. Reading the posts, I could feel the sense of loss, the mourning, not just for the palace itself but mostly for the cultural and historical grandeur to which it was attached, the pride of Zanzibar and Zanzibaris since its building in the 1880s. Wonders indeed were the many 'modernities' (electricity, the lift, the marble and the materials, imported and local) the third al-Busaidi sultan Seyyid Barghash brought into that House, onto Zanzibar, the city and his own reign.

All the words describing the event offered a precise narrative of that House – one of harmonious cultural fusions, the Indian Ocean and world cultures, relations and translocalities and global flows and consumerism[18] – but all that I could

14 Povinelli, Gandorfer and Ayub, "Mattering-Forth," 310.

15 Gandorfer and Ayub, "Introduction: Matterphorical," 3.

16 Xenia Benivolski and Elizabeth Povinelli, "Ancient Sunlight: An Interview with Elizabeth A. Povinelli," *Public* 29, no. 58 (2018): 94.

17 "People are moved to tears by the built environment the way they are by their own people. The houses and the cities to us (in our place) have a soul, they breathe."

18 Anne Katrine Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London: Routledge 2003); Francesca Declich, *Translocal Connections Across the Indian*

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see was kifusi, the rubble that stood at the very forefront of every picture and video, the building literally stripped of its haiba, its charm, its grace, partially revealing its intimate interior, interrupted, after so many years of use and abuse.[19] In the eulogies delivered all over the Internet, the collapse is understood as and associated with loss, something irreparable. But there is also a counter narrative from the patriots (wazalendo) committed to letting the city collapse, which allows its wenyeji – rightful Zanzibaris – to erase the distasteful history of foreign domination once and for all.[20] **And yet the rubble and how it matters is not determined solely by the words on it. Rather, it matters-forth in specific material discursive intra-actions, specific apparatuses.**

String 2 – in/determinacy

White, Black and otherwise racialized bodies do not exist as ontologically determined (id)entities "out there". Rather, they become determined through measuring intra-actions and agential cuts in specific apparatuses (of which words are a part) as Black, white or otherwise racialized bodies. Race is then not a feature of individuals. Rather, racialization is part of (some) processes of (id)entity constitution through iterative cuts[21] *that resolve the inherent indeterminacy of situated relations.*

It is the in/determinacy of the rubble that enables the patriots to imagine an "African-(Black)-city-yet-to-come". The rubble holds the potential of a-void-ing an uncomfortable past, one that ties the stone of the House (and of the Old Town) to Omani and to colonial power – Arab and European colonial power. Even though the Old Town has never been a homogenous agglomerate of coral stone houses, from the late 18th century onward the stone came to be racialized,[22]

Ocean. Swahili Speaking Networks on the Move (Leiden: Brill 2018); Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World. African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 2008); Julia Verne, *Living Translocality: Space, Culture and Economy in Contemporary Swahili Trade* (Stuttgart: Steiner 2012).

19 William C. Bissell, "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia," *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2005): 215–48; Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2016); Garth Andrew Myers, *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 2003).

20 Mohammed K. Ghassani, "Kijiweni: Profesa Abdul Sheriff na Kuporomoka Beit al Ajaib," *Gumzo la Ghassani*, recorded and edited by Mohamed K. Ghassani, December 27, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw5immtooZM.

21 Barad, *Universe*, 57.

22 After the violent revolution of 1964 that overthrew the Sultanate, the government, in the name of equality, claimed ownership of plantations and stone houses, evicting people from their homes, seizing their possessions, and redistributing them to Zanzibaris from all over the islands. But stone masonry was a specialized technology, an art that required initiation into a

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mattering-forth and standing – matterphorically – for racialized difference[23] between unlanguaged Blackness – spoken of as Africanness – and the unlanguaged light-skinned rest – spoken of as Europeanness, Arabness, Indianness and the like.

String 3 – un/racialization

In Germany I'm almost never measured and determined as white. Agential cuts between Germanness and whiteness are rarely enacted – those between Germanness and Blackness, however, are enacted all the time.[24] *(White) German bodies like mine co-constitute the measuring agencies measuring for race without being measured themselves. What emerges as "ontologically mapped", Yancy writes, is the Black body: "Its coordinates lead to that which is always immediately visible: the black surface. The white thinks that [they take] no part in this construction."*[25] *My whiteness does not (become) matter.* **I am not held response-able for the centuries of white violence that have been measuring – matterphorically – and bringing forth exploitable and killable Black bodies.**

In Zanzibar, while we are not sure how enslavement was languaged, it certainly measured and brought forth un/mattering, exploitable [African Black] bodies. In the 1964 revolution, [Black] Africanness was mattered by the wazalendo, by the patriots, who appropriated essentializing [British White] colonial racial cate-

powerful guild, similar to blacksmiths' and herbalists' practices (Meier, *Swahili Port*, 40), and combined together with uzoefu and/or uwezo (here, financial power). As a matter of fact, in post-revolutionary Zanzibar in the 1980s, when the degradation of Old Town made apparent the economic inability of both the state and the stone houses' tenants to take care of its maintenance, the government began to search for a different (?) narrative to be granted donors' support and investment. The Old Town had to become a collective cultural property to be protected. The name that had marked the distinctiveness of the colonial 'proper' and elitist space, Stone Town, attached to a very loud rebranding and transformation of Old Town into the "famous historic city" (Bissell, *Nostalgia*, 220) on which the government hoped to rebuild the islands' economy. The new Old Town made its matter its title, Stone Town, creating the colonial dual city anew (William C. Bissell, "Casting a Long Shadow: Colonial Categories, Cultural Identities, and Cosmopolitan Spaces in Globalizing Africa," *African Identities* 5, no. 2 (2007): 181–197.), and re-invented its other side as the counter-city, the 'native' city, which was rendered invisible (Italo Calvino, *Le Città Invisibili* (Torino: Einaudi 1972); Filip De Boeck and Marie-Francoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven: Leuven University Press 2014).

23 Meier, *Swahili Port*, 27.

24 Katharina Oguntoye, May Ayim, Dagmar Schultz and Audre Lorde, *Farbe bekennen: Afrodeutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag 1986).

25 George Yancy, "Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness," *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed George Yancy (New York: Routledge 2004), 9.

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gories to mobilize against the [light-skinned] Uarabu in power. These are the times when violence explodes and is performed and languaged in those racializing terms. Today, as race is unlanguaged, in Zanzibar, **who is to be held response-able for decades of [Black] violence [wa Kiafrika] that measures and brings forth killable [light-skinned] bodies [ya Kiarabu]?** Despite the violence enacted to erase Arabness (during and after the revolution), the House of Wonders – mattering Arabness – remained in place. Its collapse, its rubble, holds the possibility for the patriots to unmatter Arabness in its materiality as well.

And yet the same rubble to the Zanzibari historian Prof. Abdul Sheriff holds the potential of undoing race so as to unracialize Zanzibari identity: the rubble itself does not end with-in the stone, rather with-in all the materialities and the stories it is made of: "we all, people, are Zanzibaris and this is our culture,"[26] even though it is partly the fruit of foreign domination.

String 4 – un/comfortable response-ability

At the second last stop of the approximately 6-hour long protest, the banner is laid out on the street. After a while, the wind begins to flap over its edges and to move it bit by bit. I don't notice. I'm looking around the crowd that is now sitting mostly on a round grass space, listening to the speakers. I then turn around and see the Black organizers, who've been keeping an eye on this protest-center-piece, putting stones on the banner's edges. But they are too small and the wind too strong. It happens again: The wind flaps over the edges and moves the banner. Now I am watching, sitting maybe 3 meters away, as one of the closest people there. Normally I would have jumped up and helped, but I remained seated, uncomfortable. I wouldn't and couldn't enter that space so vibrant with Blackness. Only later I realized what had stopped me: If I got up to help, cuts would have been enacted that would determine me as white. A white person who wants to draw attention to herself by helping the Black organizers, maybe. Certainly, whatever I did would be made sense of in conjunction with my whiteness. Race made me remain seated. In this space, Blackness demands its alter-native: whiteness. My whiteness was made (to) matter. It became material. It constrained if and how I acted and moved. I am not used to that in Germany. But the intra-action with this banner racializes me. Getting up and helping would have meant to risk myself (Yancy 2004), to not know what would be made of me, to not know what I would become. And so I remain

26 Abdul Sheriff, "Partial Collapse of the House of Wonders, Public Discourse on its Future Recovery as a World Heritage Site, and National Reconciliation in Zanzibar," *Cultural Heritage and People in the Post-Trauma Process: Building Resilience through Integrated Reconstruction and Recovery of Heritage*, March 9, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD4W7ek-F2U.

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seated – in an uncomfortable comfort zone. Even if I had risked myself, my body would not have become killable but merely more uncomfortable. And yet, my uncomfortableness is already dangerous. White uncomfortableness is dangerous. White uncomfortableness holds the possibilities for triggering – again, matterphorically – Black death. **At the same time, it holds the possibilities for new relations, for new and more just ways of intra-acting through white response-ability.**

"In the rubble there is a treasure which could not have come to light anew if the House had not collapsed,"[27] says Prof. Sheriff; but the rubble makes the government uncomfortable, so it wants to clear it away. The treasure he refers to are huge and very old timber planks, carved in Islamic calligraphy, painted in gold and green. These planks constituted a very visible part of the front side of the verandas in the first building, the one envisioned and realized by Sultan Barghash. In the palace's renovation, following the (white) British army bombing[28] meant to restore colonial power over the sultanate, the British needed poles to support the house's clock-tower. They needed wood, any wood, and so they took these very planks from the verandas. The planks, turned in such a way as to make their carvings invisible, literally disappeared from the sight of the colonialists, and, forcibly, from the memories of Zanzibaris.

"While anyone who dared such a thing today", Sheriff says, "would be considered an aggressor against history, they did it. They took that wood and since they needed it to be plain, they hid the carving."[29] But now, the rubble opens up the possibility to re-member[30] those planks as unifying un/racializing matter. Hope is not IN the rubble, but OF the rubble. It matters-forth an otherwise avoided un/racialization. **The rubble holds the possibilities for new relations, for new and more just ways of intra-acting through a comprehensive Zanzibari response-ability.**

27 Ghassani, *Kijiweni.*

28 At their arrival, after Seyyid Barghash died, the British claimed the power to decide who would become sultan, depriving Barghash's son, Sayyid Khalid bin Barghash, of his succession rights. While he did not react immediately to the death of the successor chosen by the British, Sayyid Hamed bin Thuwain, who passed away five years after coming to power, Sayyid Khalid bin Barghash decided to claim his status and position, physically moving into the House. He held his throne against threats until the British army reacted by bombing the House, initiating the shortest war in world, which lasted only 45 minutes, and killing between 400 and 500 people. It was 1896 when Khalid bin Barghash fled the country, and the British took power over the House too, rebuilding the palace and incorporating a clock-tower into its design.

29 Abdul Sheriff, "Kijiweni: Kuporomoka Beit al Ajaib," *Gumzo la Ghassani*, ed. Mohammed K. Ghassani, December 27, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw5immtooZM.

30 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd 1986).

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String 5 – the void

Donna Britt writes in the Washington Post on November 25, 2021: "As a Black woman whose life was irrevocably altered by police violence, I found the banner – offered by members of a predominantly White church near my home – reassuring." Britt then tells the story of Jim Nix, a white fitness coach, and the intra-action that enfolded between Nix and this very banner. Nix supported the church's decision to put up the banner. One night, the banner was stolen and the church decided to replaced it. The banner was stolen again and Jim Nix stepped in to buy the replacement this time. Nix rolled the banner up and stored it away every night to protect it from theft, putting it back up every morning. Then, in broad daylight, someone cut out the word 'Black', leaving 'Lives Matter'. "How sad you must be to have to cut the word "Black" out of a sign", Nix said as part of his reaction. After the next restauration, Nix caught a sixty-something year old white man spray-painting over the words on the banner and confronted him. The man said that the sign made him feel uncomfortable and then ran away.

When the banner was first stolen there was a void. Rubble swept away leaves a void. **But a void is never empty. In Barad's words, a void "is not nothing (while not being something), but rather a desiring orientation toward being/becoming, innumerable imaginings of what might yet be/have been. Nothingness is material (even) in its non/presence."**[31] **That is, the void left by these removals is not empty, but rather is a thick nothingness full of all that it is entangled with – history, memory, materialities, discourses, the poet, the historian, me; American and German protestors, Britt, Nix, me.**

String 6 – the wound

Whoever cut out 'Black' did not simply cut out a word. Or actually, yes, they did cut out a word. But "as if a word could be a word!"[32] *They cut out something that matters, something that is matter. They attempted to destroy matter that "forces a new field of arrangement,"*[33] *matter that de/stabilizes the order of things. A-voiding 'Black' and leaving 'Lives Matter' is also a cutting out of Black's alter-native, 'white'. It is an a-void-ance of white response-ability. The aggressions against the banner speak of the im/possibilities of un/mattering race and of un/doing established identities that vibrate from it.* **Cutting out 'Black' is an attempt to cover up**

31 Karen Barad, "After the End of the World: Entangled Nuclear Colonialisms, Matters of Force, and the Material Force of Justice," *Theory & Event* 22, no. 3 (2019): 528–29.

32 Povinelli, Gandorfer and Ayub, "Mattering-Forth," 310.

33 Elizabeth Povinelli, "The Urban Intensions of Geontopower," 2019. https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/liquid-utility/259667/the-urban-intensions-of-geontopower/.

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– mind you, not to stitch or even heal – the wound of race: to close it up, so that it does not make us uncomfortable. *I think back to how I remained seated, avoided the banner, felt uncomfortable – even though I went to the protest voluntarily.*

And so, the government hurries up in clearing the rubble away, in "a conscious attempt at a-void-ance of responsibility"[34] towards the wound of race, because rubble as matter is not only stating but also doing Zanzibariness, uwenyeji, as a multiple wholeness – and undoing it as essentialized and fixed. As rubble, Zanzibariness is not classifiable-in-order-to-be-governable. It is a multiple, infinite, in/determinate identity of a "rainbow-coloured-people"[35] that becomes problematic to the political power. **Sweeping out the rubble is another controversial attempt to re-store the palace, to push away – mind you, not to stitch or even heal – the wound of race: to shove it aside, so that it does not make us uncomfortable.**

But Nix continuously re-membered and re-mattered the un/comfortable banner and Britt writes how Nix's "efforts to protect the sign helped him make peace with his own feelings about race". She herself says: "So this Thanksgiving, I'm grateful for the now-absent sign and its surprising-to-me savior."[36] **And I am grateful for her mattering-forth of the banner in her writing so it could become entangled with mine, helping me to develop response-ability in relation to my uncomfortable banner encounter.**

On September 13, 2021, I wrote an email to Prof. Sheriff, inquiring on the fate of that rubble. He said it was dumped in the creek near the old Bwawani Hotel and that nothing has been done to sift through it, to rescue the beams with Islamic inscriptions. I can see Mzee Sheriff anticipating the first rains: "Already we have begun to receive rain in early mornings, and soon we may begin to get Vuli rains, and the termites will begin to do their work."[37] **And I am grateful for his mattering-forth of the rubble in his wor(l)ding, a re-membering and re-mattering of the un/comfortable palace, which has become-with the thousands of wor(l)ds online and offline, and with me, with us, helping us to develop response-ability in mattering-forth our uncomfortable encounters.**

34 Barad, "Nuclear Colonialism," 540.

35 Sheriff, "House of Wonders."

36 Donna Britt, "A Stolen BLM Banner, its White Defender and Giving Thanks," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/25/blm-banner-saved-by-white-man/.

37 Sheriff, email to one of the authors, September 14, 2021.

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The string figure, or: the un/comfortable response-ability of translating matter

The government and the aggressor against the banner attend to the rubble and the word Black, respectively, as representations – when out of sight, then out of matter. The sweeping of the rubble, the cutting out of 'Black' are attempts at closing up the wound of race that is not allowed to matter-forth, not allowed to work and constitute the pastfuturespresents.[38] The cutting and the sweeping are avoidance. But both the rubble and 'Black' are matter, and therefore they matter-forth in their absence as well. So, by attending to them matterphorically, we do not avoid our response-ability. Rather, we try to become un/comfortably response-able; that is, we try, in Barad's words, "to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility to that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities that 'we' are, the noncontemporaneity of the present, to put [ourselves] at risk, to risk [ourselves] […] to open ourselves up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come."[39] In this sense, we become translators of matter, enacting the Swahili practice of kutafsiri – that is, translation and interpretation in one – in a radical re-turning, re-membering of the wor(l)d.

This conversation, this collaborative String Figure, is our attempt to risk ourselves by staying with the uncomfortableness – or with the trouble – by consciously letting ourselves be pulled towards the wound of race through the encounters with worded rubble and banners. Bannered words, worded banners, rubbled words and worded rubble – in their mattering – are not *in* 'the German context', 'the American context', 'the Zanzibari context'. The intra-action emerging through their materiality shows how they are *of* the world, they are matter, "not as fixed entities but as constantly shifting (*phoric*) and thereby establish[ing] entanglements and relationalities"[40] that un/do the here and the there, the now and the then, the self and the other, the Black and the white.

We might think we do not see the wound of race around us; we might not be used to sensing it, especially as white bodies with the privilege of retreat from racialization, the privilege of remaining seated or turning the beams. We are so stuck in the divide between meaning and matter that we don't sense the traces, the material-discursive strings coming from the wound of race, tangling around us in different ways and as different matter. We let ourselves be pulled into the SF of worded rubble and bannered words. We are trying to find a matterphorical

38 Barad, "Nuclear Colonialism," 543.

39 Karen Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come," *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 264.

40 Princeton University, "Reading Matters".

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common language, a common wor(l)ding in conversation, for these different matterings of the wound of race. We hope that the strings we matter-forth can pull others into attentiveness towards manifold racial(izing) matterings that we cannot anticipate and that might have so far remained unwor(l)ded.

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Material and Discursive Reproduction of Gender/Sex in Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Abstract
The essay elaborates on the role of the bowels in actualising culturally-specific representations of gender, sex, agency and embodiment. To this end, I will analyse biomedical articles on the gastrointestinal disorder of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) by focusing specifically on the relation between IBS and the material and discursive reproduction of gender and sex. Finally, I will suggest possible understandings of agency and embodiment with reference to the biopolitical role of the bowels in the regulation of the regimes of sexuality and sex.
Keywords: Irritable Bowel Syndrome, gender, sex, medicine

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a chronic, functional, gastrointestinal disorder believed to affect, in biomedical literature, from 1.1% up to 45% of the global population.[1] According to the fourth revision of the Rome diagnostic criteria, IBS is a disorder "in which recurrent abdominal pain is associated with defecation or a change in bowel habits."[2] As seen by its definition, Irritable Bowel Syndrome is a so-called *functional* disorder, which means IBS is not associated with any detectable "structural or biochemical abnormalities,"[3] as there is no diagnostic technology currently able to identify a pathological marker specific to this syndrome. In fact, IBS gets recognised as such only through chronic and painful deviations from what could be standardly defined as a 'healthy and functional' bowel habit. Moreover, again complicating evidentiary or reductionist accounts of illness, IBS has been proven in scientific research to present strong comorbidities – that is, co-occurrences – with psychological distress and experiences of trauma.[4] Finally, Irritable Bowel Syndrome presents yet another note-

1 Paul Enck et al., "Irritable bowel syndrome," *Nature Reviews. Disease Primers*, no. 2 (24th March 2016): 2.
2 Brian Lacy et al., "Bowel Disorders," *Gastroenterology*, no. 150 (2016): 1393.
3 Enck et al., "Irritable bowel syndrome," 1.
4 See Guillaume Fond et al., "Anxiety and depression comorbidities in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS): a systematic review and meta-analysis," *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical*

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worthy characteristic: it is an exceptionally gendered diagnosis. Indeed, in medical literature "the female sex" is reported as "the best-documented risk factor for IBS."[5] The nexus between gender, sex and IBS has hence been greatly discussed in different medical fields, with arguments proposing biological and/or socio-cultural causalities for explaining such an association. This scientific debate strongly interested me for its deep implications and critical resonances for feminist considerations around the relation between sex and gender, as well as on the 'mutually leaking' constitution of the regimes of nature and culture, matter and discourse, biology and society.

With the aim of considering how gender and sex are re/produced[6] in biomedical discourse around IBS, I will apply a methodological approach primarily inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of discourse. The Foucauldian analysis of discourse takes discourses as bodies of knowledge that produce subjectivity by specific institutional practices, which, as highlighted by Magdalena Górska, often have a normative and essentialising effect that critical discourse analysis seeks to deconstruct.[7] This approach thus conceptualises discourses not as mere representations of reality, but as productive and constitutive of it. However, I do expect to emphasise in this article not only how discourses construct and affect matter, but how, in parallel to this process, bodies agentially and performatively participate in the reproduction, disruption and creation of discourses themselves. In carrying out the latter, I will also attempt to practice what Magdalena Górska terms as "material-discursive analysis," which centralises "the agential role of embodiment"[8] within and alongside discursive processes.

Gender

When it comes to IBS, studies considering the difference between female and male patients[9] mostly highlight effects on prevalence, symptomatology, psychophysical comorbidities and efficacy of treatment. In order to explain discrep-

Neuroscience, no. 264 (2014); Anne-Marie Leroi et al., "Prevalence of sexual abuse among patients with functional disorders of the lower gastrointestinal tract", *International Journal of Colorectal Disease*, no. 10 (1995).

5 Enck et al., "Irritable bowel syndrome," 3.

6 One of my assumptions is that any study considering gender and sex as variables participates at the same time in the production and reproduction of these same variables by constructing, reinforcing or resisting specific discourses around them.

7 Magdalena Górska, *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability* (Linköping: Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping University, 2016), 79.

8 Ibid., 79–80.

9 Significantly, in all of the articles I have read and taken into account for this paper, only women and men were considered.

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ancies within these aspects, part of the existing research emphasises socio-cultural expectations differing in relation to gender, such as health-seeking behaviours. This type of causation hence stresses, at the root of gendered variations in the experience of the syndrome, the existence of a 'social' rather than exclusively biological difference.

The importance of focusing on 'gender' rather than 'biological sex' when examining similarities and differences among IBS patients is strongly argued by psychiatrists Brenda Toner and Donna Akman. In their study, Toner and Akman affirm that scientific literature on IBS "should aim to separate the impact of gender role *versus* biology."[10] In order to do that, they propose looking at those traits that are common across IBS patients and the relation they have to what is generally considered as 'appropriate gendered behaviour'.[11] Based on their clinical work with female IBS patients in a cognitive-behavioural therapy program, Toner and Akman identify "some common concerns or issues that seem to be highly salient and meaningful for these women."[12] The authors argue that all of those issues could be reconducted to a mandate of what is socially considered as 'appropriate' for women in our society. For instance, societal gendered expectancies of "self-control, cleanliness, and dainty behavior"[13] may induce shame and embarrassment in female IBS patients while a "cultural emphasis on female beauty"[14] may induce women to bring more attention to those symptoms (such as bloating or constipation) which may clash with expectations of 'feminine attractiveness', as especially mediated by 'thinness'. According to the authors, the distress caused by these symptoms, alongside the minimisation of female pain by health care professionals, may then end up catalysing even more sensitivity to pain, produced by the increased anxiety and body vigilance. A focus on gender roles could thus promote, in Toner and Akman's view, an understanding of how the experience of women with IBS is shaped by their socialisation and of how gendered factors such as an overload in domestic work may even aggravate the severity of the symptoms via stress. Therefore, for the two psychiatrists, gender socialisation plays a dramatic role both in the aetiology and treatment of IBS.[15]

Toner and Akman's critical approach is indeed fundamental in disrupting essentialising discourses on the deterministic nature of sex and biology by focusing instead on gender roles and gendered socialisation and their result in inequality. However, I would like to argue that the separation between 'gender

10 Brenda Toner and Donna Akman, "Gender Role and Irritable Bowel Syndrome: Literature Review and Hypothesis," *The American Journal of Gastroenterology* 95, no.1 (2000): 13.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 15.

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roles' and 'biological sex' may end up reproducing similar naturalisations when it comes to the performance of gender and of 'femininity' specifically. In fact, I believe this line of thought often proceeds through a circularity by which a *gender loop* is produced. By saying, for instance, that women are socialised to consider thinness as a 'cultural value' and that, for this reason, they may get more distressed around the bloating effects of IBS,[16] this trait – desiring thinness – may be, again, naturalised as an attribute of women's characters by assuming women's desire necessarily aligns with generalised societal expectations. Moreover, this account ends up reifying biology as separate to gender and perpetuating a binary understanding of sex. Why could not forms of distress around the body be, instead, a manifestation of 'misfitting' or resisting rather than of matching society's injunctions? What could be the multiple affects involved in the experience of pain and somatic vulnerability? And what is the agency of the bowels, and of the body in general, when it comes to the articulation of so-called socio-cultural expectations and power relations?

Exploring similar questions, Jean Walton considers the gendered cultural significance of *peristalsis*, which is the contraction and relaxion of the muscles propelling food along the digestive tract. Walton argues against an understanding of what she terms "the olfactory-intestinal-peristaltic desiring-machine […] as primarily a "defense reaction" as opposed to "a pleasure-producing mechanism in its own right."[17] Walton then shows how, within the framework of considering the agency of the guts, cultural standards of cleanliness, thinness and self-control situate bowel movements as co-participating in the functioning of a broader capitalist peristaltic machine. Therein, the desires for consumption, waste production and expulsion are produced, alongside resistance to these interpellations and other desiring-machines. The association of IBS with what are considered to be 'feminine traits' would then bespeak a more profound connection between the body and its implication into specific systems of production and reproduction, where societal expectations may not only affect the experience of illness and pain, but be continuously and agentially reshaped by and within those specific corporeal enactments of vulnerability. This is a process, as highlighted above, that is always together material and discursive.

16 Ibid., 14.

17 Jean Walton, "Female Peristalsis," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 86.

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Sex

Another type of causality often raised to explain the gendered disproportion in the diagnosis of Irritable Bowel Syndrome concerns factors that are deemed as primarily or exclusively 'biological' or 'physiological', such as so-defined *sex hormones*. Specifically, while some studies have found a correlation between menstruation and increase in IBS symptoms,[18] others have hypothesised a link between higher levels of testosterone and protection from IBS.[19] Moreover, an overall linkage between what are considered as 'female sex hormones', such as oestrogen, and a general increased susceptibility to stress, reduced gut motility, and pain perception has been suggested.[20] Most of these studies, with no lack of complexity and ambivalence in their results, hint at making a broader connection between 'female sex hormones' and a higher sensitivity to "environmental stimuli."[21]

I would like to argue that the feminisation of sensitivity, as well as the location of sexual difference in hormonal 'hyper-susceptibility', bears an interesting historical resonance with the category of *impressibility* as analysed by Kyla Schuller. Impressibility is defined by Schuller as the capability of internal responsiveness to external stimuli and independent action, working, in nineteenth-century racial thought, to mark the white body against the racialised and supposedly 'unimpressible' other. Schuller argues that sex difference was specifically promoted in the same century in order to further stabilise the racial hierarchical system by means of balancing "the somatic vulnerability of the impressible races by dividing the civilized body into two halves: the sentimental woman, who possessed both a heightened faculty of feeling and a more transparent animal nature, and the less susceptible and more rational man, thereby relieved from the burdens of embodiment."[22] The vagina of the white woman then became, in Schuller's words, the "apex of nervous impressibility,"[23] with the ultimate biopolitical function of preserving sexual differentiation and hence racialisation. In stark contrast, the anus and anal sexuality were considered to be opposed and

18 See M.A. Adeyemo et al., "Meta-analysis: Do Irritable Bowel Syndrome Symptoms Vary between Men and Women?," *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics* 32, no. 6 (2010); Young Sun Kim and Nayoung Kim, "Sex-Gender Differences in Irritable Bowel Syndrome," *Journal of Neurogastroenterology and Motility* 24, no. 4 (2018).

19 See L.A. Houghton et al., "Do male sex hormones protect from irritable bowel syndrome?," *The American Journal of Gastroenterology* 95, no. 9 (2000).

20 Kim and Kim, "Sex-Gender Differences in Irritable Bowel Syndrome."

21 Anna Maria Aloisi, "Gonadal Hormones and Sex Differences in Pain Reactivity," *The Clinical Journal of Pain* 19 (2003): 172.

22 Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling. Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 16.

23 Ibid.

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detrimental to 'civilised sexuality', possibly leading to sickness of the genitals, the bowels or of the whole nervous system.[24] Hence, the biopolitical function of the vagina in regulating sex and sexuality became strictly tied to the function of the bowels and of the anus as its 'degenerate' counterparts.

Sensitivity to illness as linked to penetrability is also analysed by Michael Scarce in considering another affliction of the bowel, so-called Gay Bowel Syndrome, whose medical debut dates to the late 70s and the decline in its use only about 25 years later. Gay Bowel Syndrome refers to a broad spectrum of anorectal and colon conditions supposedly more frequent in male homosexuals. Examining biomedical discourses on this syndrome, Scarce asks: "So why is gay bowel syndrome localized to the bowel? Perhaps the perceptions of uncleanliness, coupled with deviant unnaturalness of the bowel as a site of pleasure, incriminate this anatomical locale as a likely landscape of disease. Misogyny in the form of feminine passivity (defined by medical authorities as penetrability) is also indicated, for to be sexually penetrated is to court infectious danger."[25] Thus, as noted by the afore-mentioned theorist Jean Walton, it can be observed how the negation of the anus and of the intestinal system as pleasure-producing mechanisms in their own right strictly correlates to the biopolitical preservation of the white heterosexual regime. Moreover, homophobia and misogyny rejoice in this same understanding of penetrability as physiologically dangerous, a marker of somatic vulnerability which threatens the self-contained and rational impressibility upon which white masculinity is predicated.

Gender/sex

I would like now to finally turn to what the different understandings of embodiment and agency discourses around gender, sex and the interplay between the two may foster.

The creation of what could be defined as the *sexed and gendered medical/ised body* has been central to the past decades' emphasis on difference in the medical field, leading to the definition from the late 90s of the medical branch of 'gender-specific medicine'. However, as argued by Steven Epstein, "…it is inadequate or incorrect to claim that, until recent years, medicine 'ignored' difference. The real questions, at each historical moment, have less to do with whether differences are recognized than with precisely how they are imagined and taken into account

24 Ibid., 119–20.

25 Michael Scarce, *Smearing the Queer: Medical Bias in the Health Care of Gay Men* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 23.

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and where differences are understood to be located."[26] As brilliantly illustrated by Schuller and Scarce, the localisation of sexual difference belongs to a biopolitical milieu where specific hierarchies are in function in the institution of scientific knowledge.

The universalisation of biological differences between men and women used in order to reinforce a binary notion of sexual difference[27] then also often accompanies, as noted by biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, "an additive causal model that is (biology plus culture) usually with some allowance for 'interaction' as a third, poorly articulated term."[28] Hence, the reification of biology sustains an extremely-hard-to-bridge split between the latter and what is considered as 'external' to it, such as socio-cultural factors. This lack of articulation is also lamented by scholar Sarah Payne in a review of medical research on sex, gender and Irritable Bowel Syndrome, where, in fact, she says that "[t]he interrelationship between sex and gender… remains relatively under explored in the literature."[29] Payne then concludes that the difficulty of attributing specific risk factors or influences in the experience of the illness – such as sensitivity to pain – to either gender socialisation or biological sex alone invites more complex models of difference and interaction between gender and sex.[30]

Indeed, it could be said that what Fausto-Sterling describes as the hegemonic model for accounting for sexual difference – the '*additive causal model*' – works in tandem with the reaffirmation of agency as a form of 're-inscription'. This 're-inscriptive' or 'additive' approach considers bodies as bearing the signature of socio-cultural markers while leaving the relation between biology and culture, and the biological aspects of 'culture/discourse', widely unexplored. It is then in resistance to that disregard that Fausto-Sterling proposes as a working concept the term "gender/sex" as a "softly assembled dynamic system,"[31] where the act of *becoming* is emphasised as crucial to a continuous and multi-dimensional process of de/stabilisation, reiteration and, it could be said, adopting Judith Butler's term, *performativity* of gender/sex. This process, as suggested in the introduction to my analysis, is then materially and discursively actualised in concert, and leaves the door open to understandings of agency that do not

26 Steven Epstein, "Bodily Differences and Collective Identities: The Politics of Gender and Race in Biomedical Research in the United States," *Body & Society* 10, no. 2–3 (2004): 191.

27 Ibid., 194.

28 Anne Fausto-Sterling, "A Dynamic Systems Framework for Gender/Sex Development: From Sensory Input in Infancy to Subjective Certainty in Toddlerhood," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 15 (2021): 3.

29 Sarah Payne, "Sex, Gender, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome: Making the Connections," *Gender Medicine* 1, no. 1 (2004): 19.

30 Ibid., 20.

31 Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender/sex, sexual orientation, and identity are in the body: how did they get there?," *Journal of Sex Research* 56 (2019): 532.

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reproduce a *free will vs determinism dichotomy*, but centre, instead, how matter materialises with and within specific power relations that affect it and that it can affect.

Elizabeth A. Wilson argued that psychosomatic events, such as those happening at the level of the gut, are not mere affections of the mind moving to specific organs as representations of a psychic conflict happening 'elsewhere', but prove our whole body as able of "complex thinking enacted organically"[32] – hence always affected and affecting. It is with similar spirit that I would like to recentre the agential role of bowels in Irritable Bowel Syndrome. As shown throughout this paper, this understanding invites the elaboration of a complex model of gender/sex which encompasses a non-dualistic approach to nature/culture and a biopolitical consideration of the role of bowels in regulating the regimes of sex and sexuality. To conclude, and by situating the manifestations of this syndrome within a specific biopolitical framework, I wish to foster accounts of embodied vulnerabilities that entail a delving into matter's agency, as well as historicity, in a world where bowels are always involved in the making.

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32 Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 63.

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The Anthropocene Poetics of Uroš Prah: Trans-corporeal Subjectivity and Marginal Places

Abstract
Prah's Anthropocene poetics raises the fundamental question of how to think human subjectivity in the Anthropocene. Prah breaks with transhistorical human agency, separated from the world the human has transformed, by theoretically tying the conception of agency to the new materialism. A trans-corporeal reading of Prah's poems shows that Anthropocene environments are not merely sublime scenes, but flow through bodies, intra-actively forming their subjectivity. Prah explores various sites of exposure that destabilize the dividing line between bodies and environments to demonstrate the material susceptibility and vulnerability of exposed bodies. These are sites of resource depletion and environmental degradation, places of erasure and expropriation, such as open mines, cobalt mines in Congo, or the phosphate refinery in Tunisia.
Keywords: new materialism, Anthropocene poetics, body, trans-corporeality, poshumanist subjectivity

The exposure of bodies in the Anthropocene*

One of the most important aspects of the Anthropocene is, as David Farrier states,[1] humankind's radical interference with deep time, which has become a striking and paradoxical element of our everyday. Our present is accompanied by deep pasts and deep futures: our dependence on fossil fuels, rare earth minerals and plastics puts us in touch with the distant past; the pre-human Earth shapes our present both in terms of geological layers and evolutionary biodiversity, as well as in terms of the textures, means and processes that express our experience of modernity. At the same time, the various disruptions that have shaped these dependencies, such as changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere, soils and oceans and the decline of biodiversity, illuminate our relationship with

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1 David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extincion*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 6.

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the deep future. In the context of the deep time of the Earth's history, recognition is growing that in the Anthropocene, human activities have become a geomorphological and geological force which "are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*."[2]

The understanding that human activities have changed the planet in terms of geological and biospheric processes has challenged the assumption that the world exists as a background for human subjects, and this has placed the trajectories of Anthropocene theories in dialogue with new materialisms, materialist feminisms, and materialist ecocriticism. The materialist assumption that the human is always intertwined with the more-than-human world underlines the inseparable connection of human bodies with "the environment."[3] "Nature," according to Stacy Alaimo, "is always as close as one's own skin – perhaps even closer."[4] New materialism insist on material agency, i. e., they refuse the notion of matter as passive or inert, and emphasize "the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures."[5] A strong model of material agency was developed by Karen Barad in their influential work *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) where agency "is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit."[6] Barad explains that agency is not an attribute, but it is "'doing'/'being' in its intra-activity."[7] Barad's conception of intra-action is based on quantum physics and extends beyond the term interaction, which suggests a reciprocal influence between separate entities. The term intra-action refers to a fundamental entanglement whereby agency is not understood as an inherent property of an individual entity but as a dynamic of forces where "things" constantly exchange and shift, influencing and acting on each other. Individual entities therefore do not previously exist as such, but are realized in intra-action, i. e., in their co-creative relations with other entities.

The understanding that human corporeality is interconnected with the more-than-human world marks a turning point in the conception of subjectivity and opens up space for thinking about human subjectivity within the framework of posthumanist theories. In her work *Bodily Natures* (2010), Stacy Alaimo develops the concept of trans-corporeality by drawing upon new materialist theories of non-human agency, especially Karen Barad's notion of intra-action. The concept

2 Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36, no. 8 (December 2007), 614.

3 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 177.

7 Ibid., 178.

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of trans-corporeality suggests that bodies are intertwined with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them and is transformed by them. While trans-corporeality as an anthology begins with the human, it does not exclude any living being in order to undermine the Western tradition of human exceptionalism.[8] The conception of trans-corporeality introduces a "new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments."[9] This conception enables the reconceptualization of the Anthropocene subject, i. e., a shift from the conception of the human as an invisible, transcendental, disembodied force that produces the Anthropocene to the conception that the human is always already a part of the dynamics of the world upon which they act. In an interview with Julia Kuznetski, Alaimo emphasizes that while it is important to recognize the destructive effects that humanity has on other species and planetary ecologies, it is also important not to get caught up in the dichotomy between the human and the world (where the transhistorical human acts upon the inert, external matter of the world) as this can give us a false sense of power, which limits the space for reflection on differential human vulnerabilities. The Anthropocene harms many different groups of people, such as climate refugees or inhabitants of areas with ubiquitous exposure to dangerous toxic substances.[10] It should be emphasized that the effects of the Anthropocene on different groups of people are connected to geopolitical processes and global injustices that already exist in the capitalist socio-economic system. The trans-corporeal subject is therefore generated through the intertwining of "biological, technological, economic, social, political and other systems, processes, and events."[11] Trans-corporeality suggests a new figuration "of the human after the Human," which is not founded on dichotomies and hierarchies and which does not remove the human from the world they survey.[12] The prefix *trans-* in the derived word trans-corporeality contains the meaning of multiple horizontal crossings, transitions and transformations. The trans-corporeal subject does not exist as an isolated entity[13] since the subject, if we proceed from the theory of new materialism, cannot be separated from networks of intra-active material agencies; human (and non-human) bodies imperceptibly transmit biopolitical

8 Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-corporeality" in *The Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2018), 435.
9 Stacy Alaimo, "States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea" in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 476.
10 "Transcorporeality: An Interview with Stacy Alaimo." Interview by Julia Kuznetski. *Ecozon* 11, no. 2/2020, 139.
11 Alaimo, "Trans-corporeality", 436.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 146.

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modulation, genetically modified organisms, carbon dioxide, everyday chemicals and other substances. The trans-corporeal subject is therefore not a stable entity but is rather "caught up in and transformed by myriad, often unpredictable material agencies."[14]

The concept of the trans-corporeal subject is further developed by Alaimo's work *Exposed* (2016) in which they utilize the assumption of new materialism, that subjectivities are a priori intertwined with non-human substances and forces, as a starting point for elucidating an "ethics of exposure."[15] This ethic foregrounds the material susceptibility and vulnerability of the exposed subject and thereby directs attention to the variety of lived experiences within the Anthropocene. Alaimo articulates the uneven distribution of power within the Anthropocene: "Vulnerability is paradoxical in the Anthropocene, as it is these very bodies, soft or not, participating in larger technological and economic systems that weaken the glaciers, and yet the enormity of collective human agency is countered by the sense of powerlessness that looms large here, as it does within nearly any other climate change scene."[16] Here, Alaimo draws attention to the significant paradox that human bodies are simultaneously capable and incapable of enacting geological changes.[17] The paradoxical (lack of) strength of "dwelling in the dissolve"[18] that characterizes Stacy Alaimo's ethics of exposure enables an understanding that exposure is an inherent part of the Anthropocene.

Trans-corporeal Places in the Poetics of Uroš Prah

Uroš Prah, a Slovenian poet of the younger generation, is the author of three collections of poems: *Over-Self-Slid* [*Čezse polzeči*] (2012), *Phush* [*Tišima*] (2015) and *Landslide* [*Udor*] (2019). Prah's poetics is devoted to marginal places, and the poetic subject inhabiting these marginal places is "used to living on the edges of the inaccessible,"[19]

Prah uses one of the key locations of his poetics – Cmurek – in his first collection of poems *Over-Self-Slid.* Cmurek, "a town of a dozen of ten,"[20] lies along the Slovenian-Austrian border. The Mura river flows through it, while in

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 77.
16 Ibid., 80.
17 Cf. Alex Christie, "Stacy Alaimo's Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times." Review of *Exposed*, by Stacy Alaimo. *ASAP Journal*, January 4, 2018.
18 Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 2.
19 Uroš Prah, "Revisiting Bucharest – A Digital Essay," Traduki, October 21, 2020. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://revisiting-bucharest.traduki.eu/english, no pagination.
20 Uroš Prah, *Udor*, (Ljubljana: Škuc Lambda, 2019), 36.

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the middle of it stands Cmurek Castle, a former institution for the neurologically and mentally ill, today converted into the Museum of Madness. This is the first institution of its kind that Slovenia closed with the aim of deinstitutionalization. In the poems entitled "Cmurek," Prah not only expresses his attitude to this place or to specific parts of the town, "where everyday stretches / just as odious / though sometimes mild,"[21] and the way the poetic subject is connected to it, but in the last poem from the "cycle," Cmurek presents a historical and genealogical cross-section of the layers of Cmurek and its population, with special attention to social and economic specifics, conditioned precisely by its peripheral or border location. However, the marginal place is not marked only by its placement on the geographical periphery but, in the words of Rob Shields, its placement on "the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other."[22]

In *Landslide*, Prah intertextually refers to the poem "Landslide" from his second collection of poems *Phush*, in which he alludes to the features of the *Landslide* poetry collection. "Landslide" from *Phush* ends precisely where the *Landslide* collection begins. The closing verses of this poem "here do you see therefore here from"[23] meaningfully correspond to the opening verses of the first poem from the *Landslide* collection: "I am / will be / here / only / an indicator of position."[24] In the quoted verses, Prah directs us to the spatial perspective of reading and the different temporalities and spatialities that flow through *Landslide*.

Prah records warming, over-heating, sinkholes, landslides, layering with anthropogenic rocks and the material impacts of these processes. He addresses movements in the Earth's layers, reminding us, "that the ground also / flows."[25] However, he does not only warn us that the ground is "liquefied" but that the body of his poetic subject is also "the body of water."[26] Water in Prah's Anthropocene poetics, on the one hand, appears as a constitutive element, but on

21 Ibid., 35.

22 Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

23 Uroš Prah, *Tišima*, (Ljubljana: Center za slovensko književnost Aleph, 2015), 61.

24 Prah, *Udor*, 5. The quoted verse has the following expression in Slovene: "Sem / bo / tu / le / pokazatelj lege." The Slovenian word "sem" has a double meaning: it refers to the first person present tense of the verb *to be* (I am) as well as the temporal adverb (here/destination). The former meaning, which is kept in the translation, refers to the context of authors emphasising the "building of transpersonal consciousness," while the temporal adverb "sem" points to the connection between the different temporalities and spatialities of *Landslide*. Since English does not have an equivalent with a double meaning, one of the meanings had to be left out, which unfortunately results in the impoverishment of the translation.

25 Ibid., 50.

26 Ibid., 46.

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the other hand, as is typical of "Anthropocene waters,"[27] it is subjected to processes of pollution, as in the poem that evokes the phosphate refinery in Tunisia, or control, when "urbanised city strains its waters / into thin skeins / walls them in into isolated blots,"[28] or even the re-liquefaction of permanently frozen soils due to climate change, as in the poem about the largest permafrost crater, Batagaika.

The relations between the bodies of *Landslide* and Anthropocene environments can be explained by the previously mentioned theoretical concept of trans-corporeality by Stacy Alaimo. A trans-corporeal reading of Prah's poems shows that Anthropocene environments are not merely sublime scenes but actually flow through bodies. Bodies expand into places, and places in turn affect bodies. From the bodies of *Landslide*, we discern their placing into bio- and geopolitical milieus, their "melancholy strength."[29] In *Landslide*, the material susceptibility of human and non-human bodies is foregrounded; bodies affect the environment, while, at the same time, the environment affects the bodies when it flows as "info-streams"[30] across them, intra-actively forming their subjectivity. The bodies of *Landslide* are those most severely affected by the anthropogenic processes of the Earth's system, that is, the marginal human (especially working, queer, migrant) and animal bodies. These bodies are intertwined with Anthropocene environments; microparticles and toxic substances flow through them, so the link between toxic environments and marginalized bodies is placed centre stage. According to Stacy Alaimo, we could refer to the toxic and deformed bodies in *Landslide* as "a vivid example of trans-corporeal space";[31] trans-corporeal subjectivity enables recognition of the dynamic relativity that constitutes both embodied beings and the material world that moves across them. In *Landslide*, these places are marginal, such as open mines, cobalt mines in Congo, or the phosphate refinery in Tunisia, i. e., places of resource depletion and environmental degradation, places of erasure and expropriation, places that are created when "that the ground is yielding and the surrounding quarters sink in."[32] According to Rob Shields, these places could be called "*liminal zones* of Otherness."[33]

27 Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, "Wathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality," *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2014). Accessed June 27, 2023 https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542017, no pagination.
28 Prah, *Udor*, 84.
29 Ibid., 18.
30 Ibid.
31 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 22.
32 Prah, *Udor*, 52.
33 Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 6.

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Prah's Anthropocene poetics raises the fundamental question of how to think human subjectivity in the Anthropocene. Prah breaks with transhistorical human agency, separated from the world the human has transformed, by theoretically tying the conception of agency to the new materialism, which conceptualizes the body as an intra-active materiality. Agency is not conceived as the property of a concrete, isolated entity but as something distributed and that moves across the networks into which these entities are embedded. Although "human agency is radically different from material agency, they significantly entail each other in an intersubjective way,"[34] and therefore Prah's trans-corporeal places generate "transpersonal consciousness."[35]

Batagaika

In *Landslide*, Prah has taken a decisive step into Anthropocene poetics, and in this sense the collection can be described as a turning point within Slovenian literary space. Prah addresses one of the fundamental issues of the Anthropocene, i. e., deep time and its interference with human time. The poems of *Landslide* frame multiple temporalities – both remote and accessible. They connect our present with geological temporalities: "Top layers / precariously stable / porous / time / now."[36] Multiple time perspectives are most deeply articulated through the fossilized traces of the past and the deep time that enfolds the Batagaika crater, the largest permafrost crater in the world.

The following untitled poem addresses the phenomenon of the Batagaika crater:[37]

When soil slides
ice is exposed to air
gas escapes

is it Batagaika that gasps and groans
or does something gasp and groan within it?
what might have been a mere scratch in the crust
what used to be a small clearing for a bit of road

34 Serpil Oppermann, "From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency" in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenalla Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 34.

35 Prah, *Udor*, 18.

36 Ibid., 48.

37 The poems quoted in the article were translated by Lawrence Schimel in collaboration with the author. The translations were obtained in correspondence with the author and are to be published in the anthology *Ulysses' Cat*, edited by Alexandra Büchler as part of the Ulysses Shelter project.

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began to slide and
this was no 'mere slippage'
this is a rockfall gushing stronger by the hour
popping strangely banging grunting
whizzing and whistling

here the underworld literally opens
erosion washing away all the earth
only gravel and rock remain.

The poem depicts Batagaika in "intraactive becoming," if we use Karen Barad's phrase,[38] in which "Batagaika gasps and groans / or does something gasp and groan within it?"[39] Batagaika has been in a state of constant formation through various material agencies, while at the same time, in its formation, it has also had an impact on the world and its transformation since "[w]hen soil slides / ice is exposed to air / gas escapes."[40] Prah's poem frames the deep time that surrounds Batagaika. Multiple temporalities flow through the "now" of lyric articulation; the geological materials that are revealed when "the underworld opens"[41] point to the existence of past realities, while at the same time "a rockfall gushing stronger by the hour"[42] illuminates our relations with the deep future.

The withdrawal of the utterer and the economical use of figurative means in the creation of the poem's meaning shape the specific attitude of the poem, which deals solely with Batagaika in all its material concreteness and complexity. This enables the placing of Batagaika as a concrete, extra-textual reality in a wider socio-political framework to which the text itself points. Batagaika is a crater in northern Yakutia and is the largest permafrost crater in the world; according to data from 2017, it measures 85 meters in depth and about a kilometer in width, expanding and deepening annually.[43] It was created due to the direct impact of anthropogenic factors, starting in the 1960s with the deforestation in Siberia, but "what used to be a small clearing for a bit of road / began to slide."[44] At first only a small gorge formed, "what might have been a mere scratch in the crust"[45] but over time the crater deepened, made worse by warmer summers and shorter winters.[46]

38 Barad, *Meeting the* Universe, 180.
39 Prah, *Udor*, 25.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Melissa Hogenboom, "In Siberia There is a Huge Crater and it is Getting Bigger," *BBC Earth News*, February 24, 2017. Accessed June 27, 2023 http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170223-in-siberia-there-is-a-huge-crater-and-it-is-getting-bigger, no pagination.
44 Prah, *Udor*, 25.
45 Ibid.
46 Pola Lem, "Batagaika Crater Expands," *NASA Earth Observatory*. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/90104/batagaika-crater-expands, no pagination.

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Permafrost is sensitive to climate change, which transforms its environments.[47] It contains large stores of carbon – the amount of carbon in permafrost is twice that of the atmosphere – and when the ice in the ground melts, the decomposition of organic matter releases very large amounts of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. The gas leakage further contributes to global warming, while the melting of the frozen ground leads to the liquefaction of the landscape, the collapse of building infrastructure, forest destruction and river sedimentation.[48]

The poem ends with the verses: "here the underworld literally opens / erosion washing away all the earth / only gravel and rock remain."[49] These verses demonstrate the way language is used in *Landslide*. While some locals call Batagaika "the door to hell" or "the door to the underworld,", where the underworld is set figuratively, in Prah's poem it is "the underworld" that literally opens, i. e., what is *under* ground: "*gravel and rock*."[50]

Văcărești

Văcărești, one of the places of *Landslide*, is an example of a marginal place that is also an intermediate or hybrid place since Văcărești "is not forest is not park / then what is it? / a failed reservoir / history pulverized / sunk into a semi-marsh / congealed to a half-savannah / they call it: delta / officially a reserve / what of?"[51]

Văcărești is a large-scale protected area in the Romanian capital, undergoing a process of re-naturalization or unplanned rewilding, created on the site of a large hydrotechnical project that began under the communist government in 1986 and remained unfinished (Parcul Natural Văcărești, n. d.). The place "slowly transformed into a wetland boasting one of Romania's richest ecosystems: abundant growth, numerous birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians and insects, a few Roma families, a couple of visitors who come here to relax, some gays, cruising."[52]

47 E. A. Babkina, M. O. Leibman, Yu. A. Dvornikov, N. Yu Fakashchuk, R. R. Khairullin, & A. V. Khomutov, "Activation of Cryogenic Processes in Central Yamal as a Result of Regional and Local Change in Climate and Thermal State of Permafrost," *Russian Meteorology and Hydrology* 44, no. 4/2019, 32. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://doi.org/10.3103/S1068373919040083.

48 Merritt R.Turetsky, Benjamin W. Abbott, Miriam C. Jones, Katey Walter Anthony, David Olefeldt, Edward A. G. Schuur, Charles Koven et al. "Permafrost Collapse is Accelerating Carbon Release," *Nature* 569 (April 2019), 32–33. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01313-4.

49 Prah, *Udor*, 25.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 8.

52 Prah, Revisiting Bucharest, no pagination.

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The Romanian capital and its surroundings are undergoing the processes of intensive desertification and overheating, while "the light's / too much / on the edge / of Văcărești,"[53] which "soaks up the sun's energy and transforms it into life,"[54] functioning as "a massive sun temple."[55] The poet locates his body "on the warm / concrete slope,"[56] cultivating imagery in which the body is both a marker and sensor of the sun's warmth. It is the very spatial overlapping of human bodies and weathery nature, what Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker (2014) call the transcorporeality of weathering. Prah's intervention in our cultural imagery of weather and climate change enables the readers to think the relationship between bodies and climate and "reimagine our bodies as archives of climate."[57]

As is typical of Prah's marginal places, Văcărești is also inhabited by marginal (human and animal) bodies: "birds / and some guys, perhaps / cruising."[58] In one of the poems about Văcărești, subtitled "Reeds," Prah describes the scenes among the reeds of cruising gays as "bucolic", but "almost / drowned out by the heavy / traffic on the road just meters / away."[59] Alluding to Virgil's bucolic poetry, which depicted an idealized shepherd's life, he establishes one of the modern inverted modifications of this genre. In Prah's so called queer pastoral, the pastoral countryside of the Roman era is replaced by the rewilding of Văcărești from the early 21st century, where cruising gays appear instead of shepherds.

"Katanga"

Prah explores various sites of exposure that destabilize the dividing line between bodies and environments to demonstrate the material susceptibility and vulnerability of exposed bodies. The following poem is set in the environment of the

53 Prah, *Udor*, 8.
54 Prah, Revisiting Bucharest, no pagination.
55 Ibid.
56 Prah, *Udor*, 8.
57 Neimanis and Walker, Wathering, 558.
58 Prah, *Udor*, 8. All the poems in *Landslide* are untitled, but in some cases the function of the title is taken over by the last verse, separated from the rest of the text. The approach seems sensible from several points of view: this kind of addressing does not determine our reading from the very beginning, and in addition, the separated verse-title additionally gives meaning to the poem in the reverse direction as an unemphasized organic section. *Cruising* is a term that in the LGBTIQ+ community, especially the gay community, refers to the search for quick sex in public places.
59 Prah, *Udor*, 11.

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Congo mines, which in the context of global capitalism exists as a "minimal simulacra of Western institutions".[60]

It is hard to get used to
the sheen of this mud
(backlumps)
humidity dries out
then breaks the hand
palms cracks soles
here it does not pay of
to consolidate mining
decentralised local
extraction
makes skins bloom.

The imperialist aggression of Western governments and the illegal exploitation of minerals are largely associated with coltan ore. The metal tantalum is extracted from coltan and then used to make electronic devices, such as mobile phones and computers. Since the production of coltan does not require a special infrastructure, it reaches the international market unnoticed and unhindered, and since it is not subject to a certification process, it is impossible to trace its origin. The Second Congo War was thus able to continue precisely because of the illegal extraction and sale of coltan, which was of economic interest to the Western imperialist centres.[61]

In the poem, a marginalized mining body is placed centre stage: the body is almost fused and soaked in dried mud, indicating the hard physical work of mining the substance. The verse of the "backlumps" placed in parentheses points to the consequences of this work, to the painful and deformed body. Prah creates a social/material landscape in which he highlights the relations between cobalt/coltan deposits, capitalism and mining bodies. Regimes of racialized capital accumulation place miners in dangerous environments that deform their bodies. But their deformed bodies remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated. Rob Nixon (2011) responds to certain forms of violence that are imperceptible with the concept of slow violence. Through the notion of slow violence, he seeks to foreground "recent, radical changes in our geological perception and our changing technological experiences of time,"[62] focusing on the

60 Bénédicte Kumbi Ndjoko, "Congo in the Abyss." Interview by Ann Garrison. *Global Research*, October 22, 2018. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://www.globalresearch.ca/congo-in-the-abyss/5657584, no pagination.

61 Cf. Petra Šajn, *Vloga naravnih virov v afriških konfliktih: koltan in Demokratična republika Kongo*, (Master's Thesis: University of Ljubljana, 2008), 62–66.

62 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, (Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12.

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exacerbated vulnerability of ecosystems that are treated as disposable by global capitalism and the vulnerability of the poor.

"Carthage still falling"

In her essay *States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea* (2012), which examines to what extent new materialisms can extend through the seas, Alaimo discusses the persistent cultural conception of the ocean as impervious to human harm (i. e., dumping garbage, sewage, weapons, toxic chemicals, and radioactive waste) due to its vastness and powerfulness. This conception makes it particularly difficult, as she states, "to capture, map, and publicize the flow of toxins across terrestial, oceanic, and human habitats."[63]

In the next poem, Prah extends trans-corporeality through the sea, linking humans with marine animals through trans-corporeal tracings that dramatize the far-extending effects of the human practice of dumping toxic chemicals:

> The fish are black inside
> our coast also breaking away
> Carthage still falling
> I don't know what tomorrow brings
> the desert already creeps in
> God is great
> tight is the belt
> of habitability
> we're the ones who deliver them at sea
> not those who leave.

In the first verse, toxic fish bodies are exposed: "The fish are black inside." Carthage in conjunction with toxic bodies evokes marine pollution with toxic industrial effluents in Tunisia. Tunisia is the fifth largest exporter of phosphates in the world, and even though the by-products of phosphates are toxic, just one refinery in the coastal city of Gabes disposes of 13,000 tons of hazardous waste into the sea daily.[64] Phosphogypsum, a toxic, slightly radioactive by-product of the phosphate refining process, is deposited in coastal waters, which threatens marine life. The phosphate industry alters the chemistry of the sea, and the toxins penetrate the fish and poison them. Poisoned fish bodies are inextricable from

63 Stacy Alaimo, "States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 477. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://www.jstor.org/stable/44087131.

64 Alexander Göbel, "The Quiet Environmental Disaster in Tunisia," *DW*, May 7, 2013. Accessed June 27, 2023 https://www.dw.com/en/the-quiet-environmental-disaster-in-tunisia/a-16796561, no pagination.

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the coast, which is "breaking away."[65] "Carthage [is] still falling"[66] when human industrial activity results in the sea being riddled with phosphogypsum, resulting in the fish bodies continually absorbing chemicals. The verse cited suggests "there is no solid ground, no foundation, no safe place to stand."[67]

The last two verses of the poem establish a distinction between two classes of the population (of Tunisia): between those "who deliver them at sea" and "those who leave."[68] In the last verses, the forced paradoxical position of the speaker becomes crystal clear; they identify with the poor local population, employed in industry, which on the one hand enables them to survive and on the other hand destroys their living space and forces them to lead miserable lives. The fall of Carthage did not happen with the arrival of the Arabs, nor with the arrival of the Romans (Hunt 2020). This is a war in which industry – capital – is winning and the material self cannot be disentangled from economic and political networks.

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65 Prah, *Udor*, 30.
66 Ibid.
67 Stacy Alaimo, States of Suspension, 490.
68 Prah, *Udor*, 30.

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