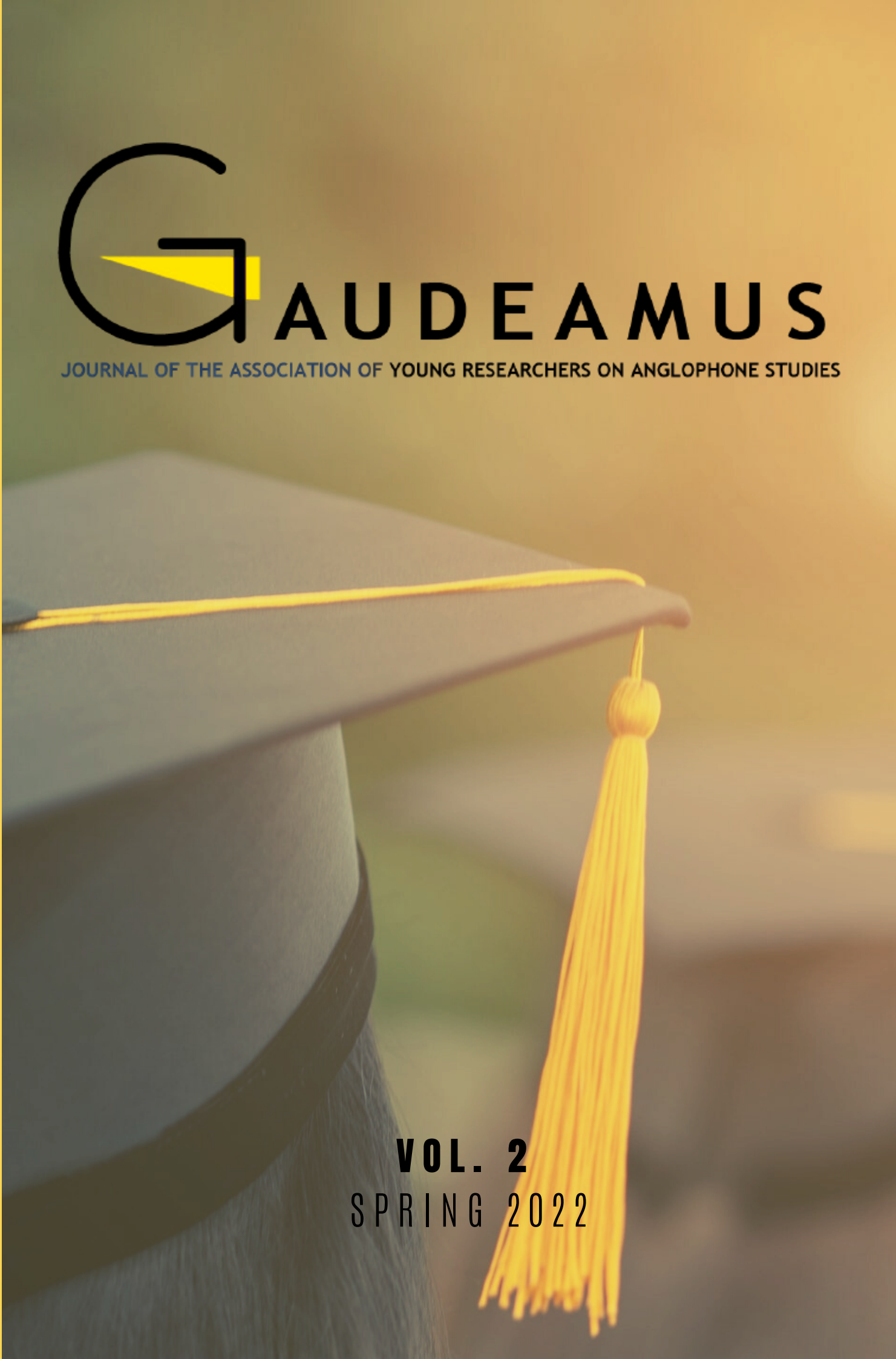
ISSN:2697-2166



GAUDEAMUS

JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS ON ANGLOPHONE STUDIES

VOL. 2
SPRING 2022

Vol. 2

Spring 2022

GAUDEAMUS
JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS ON ANGLOPHONE STUDIES

Vol. 2 | Spring 2022

GAUDEAMUS is edited by ASYRAS
(Association of Young Researches on Anglophone Studies).

Oviedo (Asturias) – Spain

EDITORIAL TEAM

Editors

Sergio López Martínez
University of Oviedo

María García Gámez
University of La Rioja

Associate Editors

Almudena Machado-Jiménez
University of Jaén

Paula Schintu Martínez
University of Salamanca

Scientific Committee

Alejandra Moreno Álvarez
University of Oviedo

Aroa Orrequia Barea
University of Jaén

Carolina Amador Moreno
University of Extremadura

Daniel García Velasco
University of Oviedo

Javier Ruano García
University of Salamanca

Paula García Ramírez
University of Jaén

Elena Avanzas Álvarez
University of Oviedo

Sara Prieto García-Cañedo
University of Alicante

Raquel Vea Escarza
University of La Rioja

Lourdes López-Ropero
University of Alicante

Roberto Torre Alonso
University of La Rioja

Rodrigo Pérez Lorido
University of Oviedo

GAUDEAMUS
JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS ON ANGLOPHONE STUDIES

Vol. 2 | Spring 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Notes

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 5-6.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

FOREWORD

...ðætte eal sio gioguð þe nu is on Angel kynne friora monna [...]
sien to leornunga oðfæste
"…that all the youth now in England of free people […]
be set to learn"
(King Ælfred)

It has been more than a year since the publication of the first volume of GAUDEAMUS, the Journal of the Association of Young Researchers on Anglophone Studies (ASYRAS). GAUDEAMUS was born in complicated times, defined by a social distancing which affected academic life considerably. *Volume 2* of GAUDEAMUS appears now in a moment in which interpersonal relations are slowly returning to their regular status. Conferences, workshops and seminars are steadily abandoning their online domains to finally take place in their corresponding academic venues, where scholars can at last exchange ideas in person.

This volume is proof that, despite the difficulties, young scholars were able to find the way to keep reading, researching and writing, and made use of all the ways at their disposal to ensure they were not denied the essential academic discussion. For this we cannot but thank them, since GAUDEAMUS would not exist without their effort.

It is now a time for optimism in the field of English studies. GAUDEAMUS has been a witness of the interdisciplinarity of that field, with the richest array of approaches, theories and points of view filling its pages. Little did King Alfred know, when he set to make English the vehicle for knowledge, of the versatility that it would acquire. From the most relevant social issues to the latest

revisions of classic texts, from ecological approaches to the most advanced techniques for linguistic investigation, English aims to serve in the present day as the channel for advancement of society, with our young researchers providing new ways for it every day.

We hope the reader finds in the following pages a faithful representation of that spirit, and that the texts included within them help expand the spark of curiosity for the new generations of English scholars.

Sergio López Martínez
President of ASYRAS and Co-Editor of *Gaudeamus*

Articles

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 9-31.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

"IT'S A SAD TALE... BUT WE SING IT ANYWAY": EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN RETELLINGS AND UTOPIAN PERFORMATIVES IN ANAÏS MITCHELL'S *HADESTOWN* (2019)

Irati Aguirrezabalaga Berra
Universidad de Salamanca

In a contemporary musical theatre landscape where retellings are resurfacing and acquiring attention from producers because of the familiarity they might offer to audiences (see Taylor and Symonds 2014), Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown* (2019) is one of the latest successes in the Broadway industry. A sung-through contemporary folk musical directed by Rachel Chavkin, the musical offers a retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, a tragic love story that narrates Orpheus' journey into the underworld in order to save Eurydice. An aspect that particularly stands out in the musical is the role hope plays in it, both within the narrative and the medium of storytelling itself. The musical establishes Orpheus as the embodiment of hope for social change, as well as engaging in politics of hope and resistance by telling the story again and again even though it ends tragically, and both the audience and the characters know that.

Considering this, the article attempts to examine the potential relationship between retellings and Jill Dolan's "utopian performatives" (2005), contending that although as she argues they

cannot be predicted and the concept was not originally applied specifically to retellings, the latter offer a perfect vehicle to engender the former. In order to explore this relationship in Mitchell's *Hadestown*, the article will depart mainly from a narrative, textual, and performance analysis that will explore the ways in which the piece uses elements that range from the narratives portrayed to costumes and historical references used to challenge and contest the hegemony of the original sources. Ultimately, this article will argue that the aspects above mentioned can potentially engender utopian performatives throughout the performance that might inspire the audiences to consider different, better possibilities for both the past and the future, thus establishing retellings in musical theatre as potentially transformative.

Keywords: *Hadestown*; musical theatre; utopian performatives; retellings

1. Introduction

Retellings, or new interpretations of already established stories, have a rich and nuanced history in Western mainstream musical theatre, and neither Broadway nor the West End have shied away from using retellings to attract audiences with familiar stories[1]. In fact, retellings as well as adaptations have been a safety net for these institutions, mainly because as Taylor and Symonds argue "producers build on audience familiarity with the basic materials and generate a new market for something that is familiar enough to appeal but which appears to be different" (Taylor and Symonds 2014, 235), and, at the same time, having these musicals on stages with access to mainly international audiences (see Kenrick 2008) can be incredibly beneficial to offer representation for underrepresented communities. Moreover, it is possible to take this sense of familiarity further and use it not only to challenge the

[1] Notable examples in the last decades include Lucy Moss and Toby Marlow's *Six* (2017) and Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (2012).

hegemony of the original stories and expose the intersectional (see Crenshaw 1989) structures of power that might be present in them, but also to contest these and offer the audiences that attend these performances an opportunity to reimagine stories in a potentially more subversive way.

Nonetheless, despite previous successes and the potential to be regarded as political and socially charged works, there is still a severe lack of scholarship in academia regarding contemporary musicals, sometimes dismissed because of their popular nature (Taylor and Symonds 2014, 234), and there is an even more noticeable critical lack when it comes to the specificities of retellings and their potential radicalness in contemporary musical theatre. With the aim of filling this gap, the present paper will take *Hadestown* (2019) as a case study, a sung-through musical written by Anaïs Mitchell and directed by Rachel Chavkin. Developed as a "DIY community theater project in Vermont in 2006-7" (Mitchell 2020, 3), what started as an experimental concert that evolved into an album has now become a Broadway musical that won eight Tony Awards in the 2019 season, including the award for the best musical. This show departs from the original Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story of a tragic love that narrates Orpheus' journey as he manages to get into the underworld using his musical abilities to rescue Eurydice, his wife, who has been killed by a snake bite. Orpheus manages to convince Hades to let Eurydice go, but Hades only agrees with the condition that Eurydice would have to walk behind Orpheus all the way up to Earth, Orpheus being forbidden to look back to make sure she was there. In the original tale, as well as in the musical, the story ends with a doubt-ridden Orpheus looking back to see that Eurydice was in fact behind him all along, sentencing her to the Underworld forever (Hard 2004, 708). Considering the basic premise of this retelling, this article will explore how the stories on stage relate to the original sources, focusing particularly on how they not only contest and arguably successfully subvert the hegemonic narratives of the original stories, but also help the audiences reimagine the past as well as the future, thus potentially engendering utopian performatives. As Dolan argues, "utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this "now" of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future

that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later" (Dolan 2005, 7), and this article would like to use this understanding of utopian performatives to argue that retellings in musical theatre might be the perfect vehicle to create the sites of hope that Dolan proposes, which will be further explored below.

In order to do so and ultimately argue that mainstream musical theatre can be as radical as subversive, the paper will be mainly grounded on textual and lyrical analysis. Although some references to the musical styles will be made throughout the article, the analyses will be mainly based on the narrative and lyrics, relegating the musical analysis to a secondary plane. To a lesser extent as well, the article will carry out some parts of a performance analysis, focusing particularly on the choice of aesthetics, costumes, and staging, which in this musical seem more relevant than ever to understand their connection to contemporary Western societies, the attempted subversion of the original tales, and utopian performatives.

2. "It's an Old Song": Establishing the Theoretical Framework

As previously stated, arguably one of the greatest benefit retellings offer is the radical potential to reimagine the hegemony or at the very least question it, but before getting more in depth into that idea and its relationship with utopian performatives it is important to establish what retellings are and what exactly they entail as storytelling devices, particularly when it comes to musical theatre. As foundational scholar on adaptations Linda Hutcheon argues regarding musical theatre and retellings, "the stories themselves are retellings, the stories (mainly oral) are adapted in a medium to a text in the form of a play, and then it is adapted by the performers, directors, music…" (Hutcheon 2006, 39), which comes to show the complexities of the retellings when it comes to musical theatre in particular, for there are a lot of aspects throughout the adaptation process that must be individually considered. However, Hutcheon also argues that at the very core, in the most simplistic way to look at musical adaptations,

> Musicals use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere (2006, 3).

This, of course, does not mean that retellings are exclusively limited to musical theatre, nor does it mean that the term has not undergone several stages of edition and redefinition. Developed originally as a psycholinguistic term to analyse the communicative differences that mainly had to do with memory retention, adaptation scholarship has been constantly updated, particularly considering the extremely subtle differences that lay between the modern concept of retellings and the concept of adaptations. As Hutcheon pointed out, the similarities between the two terms are mainly questioned in the modes to which they are adapted, that is, the difference is that adaptations might include an extra layer of intermodality as opposed to a retelling, which might be used more as an umbrella term.

Further adding to these already established points raised by Hutcheon, Jeremy Scott coins the term "restorying" (Scott 2021, 23) as an alternative to the retelling, which is invaluable to understand how *Hadestown* operates. According to Scott, the term "retelling" can be divided into three subcategories to best capture the specificities of different types of restorying. The first one is the understanding of restorying as recycling, the second one is restorying as recontextualising, and the last one is restorying as reinterpretation (Scott 2021, 24). In the case of the musical that this paper is concerned with, and acknowledging that the lines between the three categories might not be as fixed as one might claim, the term that seems to best encapsulate the type of retelling it is is that of the restorying as recontextualising. In this category, as Scott explains, the new story uses an original source that is significantly altered at many layers such as the medium or the story itself, giving the story what he calls a "new creative impetus" (Scott 2021, 25). This idea is backed up by Julian Woolford, who argues that "the great musicals that have been created by adapting from sources such as plays, short stories, novels, films, etc. have always added value to the source material" (Woolford 2013, 34), ultimately

transforming "the work into a new greater artwork in the art of the adaptation" (Woolford 2013, 34). Another scholar that agrees with these ideas is Bud Coleman, who further argues that "concerning story and characters, a minority of musicals feature an original plot; most are adaptations of source material that first existed as a novel, short story, news article, comic book…" (Coleman 2017, 372). As a final remark on the term and understandings of retellings in musical theatre, it is interesting to note that Scott argues that "all type of restorying perform some kind of ideological function" (Scott 2021, 39), which is an idea that is reinforced by the fact that the musical chosen as case study for this article is indeed using the retelling or restorying to subvert the ideological hegemonies of the original stories. This ideological hegemony, in the source stories of *Hadestown*, is arguably framed within a cisheteropatriarchy, meaning that the stories are told from a male gaze (see Mulvey 1975) that leaves the female characters overall voiceless and without much agency. *Hadestown* challenges this by engaging with the stories from a more feminist and anti-capitalist ideological framework, contesting and subverting the expectations of a Western cisheteronormative narrative. While it is not the first adaptation to challenge the hegemony through the challenging of the canonical narratives, it is still valuable to consider that as Annika C. Speer points out in her review of Sharon Friedman's *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works* (2008) "hijacking the original text encourages audiences to rethink and challenge previous conceptions, thus altering the primacy of the classical text and making audible the voices of those who have been silenced" (2010, 234), which is what *Hadestown* manages to do.

Building on the previous point and moving towards the politics of hope, it is easy to see how by their very nature as recontextualised texts, in this case grounded on myths, retellings in musical theatre might offer a chance to reimagine the world through a lens of hope. Going back to Jill Dolan, she contends that "performance can describe, through the fulsome, hopeful, radically humanist gesture of the utopian performative, how social relationships might change" (Dolan 2005, 141) and retellings are a great way to exemplify what Dolan is trying to explain. Although Dolan does not consider many retellings in her book *Utopia in*

Performance[2], it seems quite safe to relate utopian performatives to the idea of retellings. For example, the "potential of elsewhere" that Dolan refers to in her book can be easily seen in contemporary retellings such as *& Juliet* (2019) *Wicked* (2003). The idea of hope and utopian performatives in relation to retellings gain special significance when we consider *Hadestown*, then, which despite knowing that it is going to end in a tragedy and the audience is warned at the very beginning of this, persists on explicitly defending how they will "sing it again and again" (Mitchell 2020, 249), wishing that next time it will turn out better, being guided by hope and faith for a better future. Although we cannot argue that *Hadestown* is necessarily a utopian performative due to the impossibility of predicting the moments that define it (Dolan 2005), it is possible to argue that the form and content of retellings lend themselves towards the possibility of utopian performatives. This engenders a potential for subversiveness and radicality, especially if we consider that as Dolan points out, "audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that, along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres" (Dolan 2005, 10), meaning that a lot of potential lies in the community that is created among the members of the audience that experiences utopian performatives. Finally, in terms of the politics of hope and the importance of it, it seems crucial to mention the contributions by Henry Giroux, who also made a case in favour of an "educated hope" (Giroux 2003), contending that "hope is one of the preconditions for individual and social struggle" (Giroux 2003, 98) and also "a referent for civic courage and its ability to mediate the memory of loss and the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to open up new locations of struggle, contest the workings of oppressive power and undermine various forms of domination" (Giroux 2003, 98). This relationship between hope and social struggle is also reflected in *Hadestown*, as will be further analysed below. All of these scholars ultimately argue in favour of hope, utopia, and utopian performatives as sites of resistance with

[2] It does include an example of a retelling, which is that of a Medea, but it is a short mention.

the potential to question and challenge the hegemonic forces such as capitalism or cisheteropatriarchy, and it is precisely through this contextual and theoretical framework, which lends itself well to the musical analysed below that the following sections will be written, dissecting which elements of the piece are the ones that make this interpretation possible.

3. "Is Anybody Listening?" The Shift in Female Characters' Narratives

As we have established, part of Hadestown's success lies in the ability to rely on the mixture of atemporal stories with underlying political criticism, which ensures the relevance of the story while at the same time making sure that the audience is already familiar with it. Considering its nature as a recontextualised text, there are several aspects of the musical that help engender a sense of utopian performative, as the mere fact of being a restorying allows the re-envisioning of a past that has always been understood through a certain ideological framework[3] and which this musical challenges by subverting expectations based both on the source materials and Western understanding of gender norms and sexuality. As such, one of the most interesting aspects of this musical is its potential subversiveness regarding the storylines of female characters, especially those of Eurydice and Persephone. As Wolf argues, "musical theatre has always been the terrain of women and girls, from its vibrant female characters to its passionate female fans" (2011, 6), and *Hadestown* embodies and takes further this idea giving their female characters a voice, which challenges the silence that permeates the original myths while at the same time engaging with the politics of seeing and being seen (see Solga, Phelan, Diamond) and mirroring and contesting a greater historical context of silencing female voices in theatre and performance that has permeated from the theatrical practice to the theory in academia (see Case 1988). By reimagining characters who have been canonically

[3] Mainly cisheteropatriarchy

stripped of their voices, particularly when it comes to having any sort of agency in relation to their fate (see Beam 2021) the musical takes figures which have been relegated to the margins in a subaltern position (see Spivak 1988) and places them as central in their own narratives. In Eurydice's case, in the original tale she is bitten by a snake and sent to the underworld, where she stays without being able to actively do anything to change that except for waiting for Orpheus to come and rescue her (Hard 2004, 708). Similarly, Persephone is known for having been kidnapped by Hades and having her fate decided between Hades and Demeter, her mother, without her being able to oppose these arrangements (Hard 2004, 181). This means that in terms of female agency, the stories were very limited to the historical context, which is why retellings play such an important role. The representation of these particular characters is especially pivotal on stage, because as Dolan argues if we want to do feminist readings they should be, and are, "grounded in the belief that representation-visual art, theatre and performance, film and dance-creates from an ideological base meanings that have very specific, material consequences." (Dolan 1988, 2). Beautifully worded by Dolan, what this comes to say is that representation, and especially *good* representation is crucial, for it has ramifications that extend to real life, beyond the fiction of the stage in this case. This is the reason why how Persephone and Eurydice are portrayed in this musical is subversive in as much as it gives them an agency and voice that they have not had.

On the one hand, Eurydice is granted a voice and a choice. In fact, while in the original sources she is merely the object of desire for Orpheus, the casualty that drives the plot forward, in this musical almost every choice she makes is made by herself. There are several instances in the musical that exemplify this, the first one being how Orpheus and she meet for the first time, where she is not easily won by him and his idealism (Mitchell 2020, 32). She resists the encounter and challenges every single line Orpheus directs her way, afraid to trust anyone (Mitchell 2020, 35). It can be read as a mirror for the individualism and isolation that capitalism as a system requires from its integrants, as will be further explained below, and consequently she is more prone to question it when someone tries to get closer to her. Within the limited free will that living within such

a system entails, in the musical she is portrayed as a woman who is capable of not only thinking critically but also capable of making her own decisions, which is why the choice to get married is ultimately up to her, granting her an agency that the original source does not offer. Another moment that exemplifies this agency is when she goes to Hadestown. Instead of being bitten by a snake and dying, in this musical it is an active choice to go to Hadestown (Mitchell 2020, 116). Granted, it should be questioned how much agency there is in a decision that has been made because of the horrible living conditions that the extreme capitalism has perpetuated in this fictional world, considering as well that the decision has been made with Eurydice unaware of all the consequences of the choice she was making, but it is still up to her to a certain extent to make this decision. Although not perfect, there is a certain agency that this character finds in the narrative framework of this Broadway musical.

On the other hand, Persephone is granted some sort of agency as well, portrayed to have been in love when she first decided to stay with Hades. At the point where the musical starts, she is arguably in a toxic relationship that is based on Hades' desire to own everything, including Persephone, and thus gets extremely jealous when she goes back to earth (Mitchell 2020, 100). The concept of ownership is also easily extrapolated to the workings of capitalism, where the desire for possessions and additional acquisition are some of the pillars that keep the system afloat. However, what I want to focus on here is the fact that she is able to change that. Even though she is in a toxic relationship and severely alcoholic (Mitchell 2020, 185), she is still able to question and challenge Hades' actions and she is not "a blameless victim" (Mitchell 2020, 185) as we can see for example in the song "chant," which is analysed below in relation to utopian performatives. Ultimately, these reimaginings of the stories allow the audiences to imagine not only a better future but a better understanding of the past, with characters that have not been heard finding some sort of agency and thus challenging the hegemony of history as well as engendering the possibilities for utopian performatives via the hope that is instilled in the audience seeing this change.

4. "To See How the World Could Be in Spite of the Way That It Is": Utopian Performatives and Storytelling

Although several elements come together to engender a space which is predisposed to utopian performatives, like the shift in the female characters mentioned above, none of them are as vital as the narrative framework in which the story is situated. *Hadestown* does not engage with utopian performatives solely through the politics of retelling and reimagining female narratives, but rather they do so through politics of hope mixed with the politics of storytelling. Being the stories they are narrating as pervasive throughout history as presumably well known by the general public, it is safe to assume that almost everyone in the audience, knows how the story ends. In fact, even if the audience is not aware of the original source, the musical goes a long way to state it from the very beginning, which brings us to the first song, "Road to Hell" (Mitchell 2020, 9), sung by Hermes. The song starts with him addressing the audience and thus positioning himself as the figure of the storyteller, a pivotal figure that evokes those plays represented in Ancient Greek, which bridges the gap between the source material and the material moment of the representation. The first song is characterized not only by being the one that presents every character to the audience, but also by being the one that plays with the tragic nature of the story. At first, Hermes sings that "It's an old song!/ it's an old tale from way back when/ it's an old song/and we're gonna sing it again" (Mitchell 2020, 10). This, once again, evokes in the audience the long history of these particular stories being narrated at the performance, reminding them that this is a recontextualising of narratives that have been passed down through generations. Hermes goes on to explain that "See, someone's got to tell the tale/whether or not it turns out well/maybe it will turn out this time" (Mitchell 2020, 13), which reminds the audience that the tale might not have the happy ending that the audience might be expecting. However, it is interesting to note that Hermes is already engaging in politics of hope by daring to verbalise his desire for a better outcome for the characters and by proxy for a better future. In the final section of this song, which plays with the repetition of lyrical structures, he blatantly states that "it's a sad song!/ it's a sad tale, it's a tragedy/it's

a sad song/ we're gonna sing it anyway" (Mitchell 2020,13). It is that last sentence, the one that says that even though they know it is a sad story they will tell it anyway, that once again nods to the sites of hope that are created by narrating stories whose outcome the audience already knows yet cannot help but imagine that this retelling, this re envisioning of a tragic tale, will offer a more positive ending.

These instances of hope are brought back to the material reality of the musical, ending the story with the same fate as the original source, that is, Orpheus losing Eurydice. A reprise of the first song is included at this point of the story, where Hermes sings that "It's an old song/that's how it ends/that's how it goes/Don't ask why, brother, don't ask how" (Mitchell 2020, 246). At this point of the reprise the story starts again from the very beginning, bringing back the circularity of the narrative and bringing into material reality the sites of hope that they are engendering. Hermes goes on to say that he learned from Orpheus "to know how it ends/and still begin to sing it again/as if it might turn out this time" (Mitchell 2020, 246), which is particularly relevant when the motto of Orpheus as a character is his ability to "see how the world can be, in spite of the way that it is" (Mitchell 2020, 247). He is, in fact, the physical embodiment of hope and resistance against a hegemonic system that thrives at the expense of exploitation as will be analysed in the following section. However, I would like to finish this one by talking about the last song of the piece, arguably the one that has the most potential to engender a utopian performative. This song, called "we raise our cups" (Mitchell 2020, 253), is the only instance of the musical where all the characters and not only Hermes address the audiences, breaking the fourth wall. By directly addressing the audience, they engender a sort of communitas (see Dolan 2005) not only within the audience but also with the performers themselves. The lines between stage and audience are blurred as the audience is encouraged to make a toast in honour of Orpheus along with the performers. They "raise their cups" for those who, in spite of adversities, in spite of tragic endings, continue singing, consequently creating a moment incredibly well suited for a utopian performative. As we can see in the videos that they have uploaded to social media (see Hadestown), it is the moment where the

characters are physically closest to the audience, singing in a line. The fourth wall is broken as some of the characters might toast with members of the audience throughout the song or at the end (see Harris 2021), making them complicit in their politics of hope. Interestingly, Persephone actually implies that community and remembering is what will help Orpheus, encouraging everyone to sing so that "let all our singing follow him/and bring him comfort" (Mitchell 2020, 253). With this line she is also arguably acknowledging the retelling nature of the story, possibly saying that it is through musicals like this, which remember and reimagine the original stories, that it is possible to keep the memory of the sources alive. As Here Blumer argues, "individuals acting collectively frequently broke with the routinized mundanity of daily behaviour [...]. In doing so, they created a social space necessary for innovative thought and action" (Blumer, qtd. in Schehr 55). What this means is that when facilitating a moment where the audience becomes part of a community with a shared hope and goal, the musical is engendering a potential for change and questioning of the hegemony through hopeful politics, subtly calling to action those in the audience.

5. "We're Standing with Him": Utopian Performatives and the Call for Collective Action

Another aspect that the musical utilises to engender utopian performatives is that of the concept of community, and particularly the community as a survival strategy necessary within a capitalist system that thrives on the division between the exploiters and the exploited. The idea that community is necessary as a survival strategy has been developed by several scholars, and even though some cases have been made against the romanticization of this ideal and the potential problematics that their inner workings present (see Joseph 2002), it is still a useful concept to analyse in this musical, particularly in relation to the group of workers. As it has been previously mentioned, the idea of Hadestown evokes an extreme

capitalist system, where Hades is the absolute king[4] and exploits the dead as workers for his machinery, and the group that perfectly encapsulates the power of community and the dangers of the lack thereof within such a system is that of the workers.

The first song that heavily features them is "Chant" (Mitchell 2020, 100), where they are first seen working. The line that is most repeated throughout this number is that of "keep your head low, you gotta keep your head low" (Mitchell 2020, 100), which hints at the type of labour exploitation that does not allow them to stop working or to take a minute and focus on something outside work. Being that the most obvious inference, however, there is also another aspect that those lines are referring to in a more indirect way, which is that of isolation. A crucial characteristic of capitalism is that it encourages individualism and competitiveness as opposed to collaboration, and at the beginning of the musical, when the workers have no hope nor understanding of a possible better future, isolation is all they have. This is further enhanced by the iconicity that the Broadway production uses to depict the workers as a faceless and nameless mass of working class, namely the costumes that are limited to a jumpsuit with a basic shirt that is heavily reminiscent of the famous painting of New York workers "Lunch atop a Skyscraper" (1932). They cannot look up not only because they cannot stop working but also because it perpetuates their isolation, the lack of human connection with those around them. This hopelessness within the rules of the system prevents the workers from establishing ties with the rest, which at the same time prevents them from forming a community to engage in politics of resistance and resilience that will allow them to imagine a better future.

This state of mind is somewhat explained for the first time throughout the song "why do we build the wall" (Mitchell 2020, 134), where it is particularly evident that there is some sort of systemic brainwashing going on from Hades' part. In this song,

[4] Hades being the embodiment of capitalism is accentuated by the depth of his voice register, which as Taylor and Symonds point out might be used to indicate evil in the same way that a high and light voice could be used to indicate goodness and femininity (2014, 40)

which structurally works as a broken dialogue between Hades and the workers, it is exposed that they are overworked and justify this through the politics of "us vs. them". Hades asks questions about why they are building a wall, to which the workers reply that they are doing so to keep poverty and the enemy outside of it and thus keep them safe. Although it was not originally intended to reflect any real-life situation (Mitchell 2020, 137), the audience is inevitably drawn to connect these lyrics with contemporary American politics that the right-wing Republican party with Donald Trump at its lead encouraged. As the group of people who represent the exploited and the oppressed in a capitalist society, the workers are arguably a community who share the same struggle, but who seem to lack the agency to do anything about it because they have no hope for a better future. It is not until Orpheus arrives and unknowingly becomes the embodiment of hope and desire for a better future that the workers in Hadestown are inspired to start questioning the system that isolates and exploits them, ultimately leading to a civil unrest. With a song that starts questioning the system, it comes to "tell the broader story of the Workers' awakening and Orpheus' emergence as an unwitting political leader" (Mitchell 2020, 180), which is evidenced in instances such as when they wonder "if it's true that there is nothing to be done" (Mitchell 2020, 173) or stating how

> 'Cause the ones who tell the lies
> Are the solemnest to swear
> And the ones who load the dice
> Always say the toss is fair
> And the ones who deal the cards (deal the cards)
> Are the ones who take the tricks
> With their hands over their hearts
> While we play the game they fix (Mitchell 2020, 175)

Interestingly, the structure of the song exposes the process by which the workers become increasingly inspired by Orpheus. At the beginning the song is mostly a solo, Orpheus singing to himself about his frustration with the system. However, soon enough Orpheus' lyrics are being accompanied by the workers' humming and harmonies, until they culminate in a dialogue based on repetition where, as Orpheus sings the lines, the workers echo his words increasingly convinced. Through the interaction with this

song, the workers find the sort of hope that they needed to contest what has been imposed on them, to contest Hades and his power in opposition to the workers' complete lack of agency. In fact, by the time the chant's reprise comes into play they are in a full-on revolution against Hades. Instead of dialoguing lethargically with Orpheus, they start talking to Hades himself, wondering why they "turn away when their brother is bleeding" or why they "build a wall and then call it freedom", which is at its core a challenge to everything they have been taught to know and an answer to the call for collective action that Orpheus was putting forward for them. Furthermore, the notion that they most question is that of the freedom they supposedly have, asking "If we're free/tell me why/I can't look in my brother's eye" (Mitchell 2020, 188) and "If we're free, tell me why we can't even stand upright? If we're free, tell me when we can stand with our fellow man" (Mitchell 2020, 189-190). This can be easily extrapolated to the extreme capitalist conditions that workers in the real world sustain. As the United States of America's neoliberal system's basic premise is that of freedom and as the nation heavily identifies itself with the concept of freedom as well (see Larson, Nolan), the fact that this is represented in Broadway is highly relevant, for it exposes the underlying exploitation of not only the nation but the industry of Broadway as a whole, consequently questioning the hegemonic system in place.

Another concept that the workers question throughout the chant reprise is that of the agency they lacked. Resigned to a fate of labour exploitation, the workers do not dare think of a different future without Orpheus' help. Two very telling lines of the song, which follow a similar style and wording, are those of "If I raise my voice if I raise my head could I change my fate" (Mitchell 2020, 189) and "Could I change the way it is?" (Mitchell 2020, 189). We can see here that they start not only questioning but hoping for a better future through resistance and resilience. In fact, it is the hope for different living conditions for the workers that incite them to resist against Hadestown's system, which is enhanced by the fact that Orpheus, the dreamer, shows them the very possibility of hope. It is precisely then, through the hope of a better future and questions such as "Why do we turn away instead of standing with him?" (Mitchell 2020, 189) that the workers start to actually look at each

other, to acknowledge each other and create a community that will fight back against the oppressive material conditions they live in.

The final song that primarily features the workers as a resisting community is the "wait for me reprise", which is sung towards the end of the musical when Orpheus is allowed to take Eurydice home. At this point, the workers start to see the light at the end of the tunnel with Orpheus' fate, and thus start believing that if it is possible, if Orpheus can get out, then so can they. This can be seen especially in the following fragment:

> Show the way so we can see
> Show the way the world could be
> If you can do it, so can she
> If she can do it, so can we
> Show the way
> Show the way the world could be
> Show the way so we believe
> We will follow where you lead (Mitchell 2020, 229)

As this illustrates, in the musical it is enough for one person to hope for a better future to inspire a whole community and challenge the hegemony by reimagining the life they have in favour of something that is more appealing in terms of not being exploited and oppressed.

As we have seen in this section, even though it is true that utopian performatives cannot be predicted, it is easy to see how these songs and dramatic moments offer infinite potential to achieve so. Through the retelling of a well-known story and the extrapolation to a somewhat contemporary critique of extreme neoliberalism, the musical is getting the audiences to pay attention to the underlying issues that the system represents, which is in part possible because the audience is already acquainted with the story and thus able to focus on the parts that differ. Furthermore, the audience becomes a community not only with the performers but also among themselves, establishing what could be a "political community" (see Mouffe 1991), that is, a community that is "held together not by a substantive idea of a common good but by a common bond, a public concern" (Mouffe 1991, 77). This in turn engenders the understanding of the audience and the theatre as a site of imagining alternative relationalities in relation to politics and in

relation to other human beings, which might enhance the presence of utopian performative moments.

6. "We Raise our Cups": Conclusion

If the last year in the Broadway industry has taught us anything (see Jones, Evans, Hiltner, Lewis, Siegel), it is that it engages in harmful practices that includes but is not limited to catering their performances to a very specific community that is in its majority a white and middle class audience (see Adler, Bennett), but this does not mean that the musicals do not explore social issues (see Wolf 12). In fact, it is precisely through art and by proxy the plays and musicals that are placed on the stage, mainly through giving a platform to those communities and offering representation and potentially transformative stories to the audiences, that these practices can start being contested. This idea of art being used to question the hegemony, or in other words, "the processes by which people consent to social rules that support the interests of dominant social groups" (Snyder-Young 4) has been suggested throughout the years by several scholars and philosophers, one of them being Jill Dolan, who argues that "since theater and performance direct our glances in just such constitutive ways, they offer a public space for renewing our critical attention to the machinations of dominant ideology" (Dolan 141). Although the namely public space of theatre has been put to a test this past years due to the global covid19 pandemic crisis, with plays being streamed and performance recordings being released, art and, in particular, as Dolan suggests, drama and performance, keep on offering a medium through which we can start challenging hegemonic systems in a more direct way, and in the best of times collectively. Some scholars, such as Taylor and Symonds, may counter argue that "as theatre has become increasingly commercialized, audiences have come to associate the musical not with politics or change, but with sheer entertainment" (Taylor and Symonds). However, as I have attempted to argue, not only do they challenge dominant ideology, but they can also potentially help reimagine the world as a more just place, which, considering the average white, middle-class audience member in

Broadway (see Dolan 106), it would mean that the message is reaching the people who most need to hear and understand these issues that are being raised.

Considering this context, I have pointed out that retellings, which have not been extensively analysed in relation to utopian performatives and musical theatre, engender the possibility of potentially creating utopian performatives, moments of hope which although cannot be predicted, can potentially be created in certain musicals, as it the case of *Hadestown*. Ultimately, what I have argued throughout this paper is that this musical is made for audiences to reimagine the past and consequently the future, to make them start questioning and challenging what has been told and especially how it has been told. Special attention has been given to how in *Hadestown* the nature of the retelling offers a possibility to somewhat give historically silenced female characters a voice and a possible agency, reimagining their fictional lives not as passive side stories but rather moving from the margins to the center of the narrative. Utopian performatives have also been explored in terms of the tragicality of the story and the resilience to never stop telling it in hopes of a better outcome. Finally, they have also been analysed in relation to the importance of hope when creating communities that will potentially lead up to a collective questioning of the system. All of this, as I hope I have made clear throughout the article, suggests that retellings in musical theatre offer infinite possibilities to explore how hegemonic systems and narratives can be challenged and potentially create utopian performatives that will encourage the audience to strive towards a change. This is further supported by academics such as Augusto Boal, who succinctly points out that "perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution (190). In fact, we need to remember that art does not exist in an isolated bubble far from ideologies, and these retellings with the potential to create utopian performatives as Dolan argues might have a material effect on the world, encouraging the audiences to take small actions towards change. Musicals, in the end, can be used as tools for activism, for as Bogart argues "artists and scientists are activists. They look at the world as a changeable and they look upon themselves as instruments for change" (Bogart 2014, 12). It is definitely not enough, and the

community should be striving to create a bigger change in both the industry and academia itself, but it is also true that we cannot expect every musical to be a call for immediate action that makes the audience immediately start fighting. Resistance is an endurance journey, and small steps towards change is still better than passively looking at the way things are without attempting to change anything. In the end, everyone should try to be a little bit like Orpheus, seeing the world in all its potential through politics of hope and resistance, seeing how it could be in spite of the way that it is, an ideal towards which this musical takes brave and very necessary steps. As Anaïs Mitchell wrote for Orpheus, "let the world we dream about be the world we're living now".

References

Adler, Steven. 2004. *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way.* United States of America: Southern Illinois University Press.

Beam, Michael. 2015. "The Language of Agency in the Hymn to Demeter." *The PhalloEccentric.* Web. < https://thephalloeccentric.wordpress.com/2015/03/04/the-language-of-agency-in-the-hymn-to-demeter/ > [Accessed June 28th 2021].

Ben Harris. "Hadestown Curtain Call and We Raise Our Cups 7/20/2019 (Evening)", *youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yMnVYYuyNo, [accessed 3 June 2021].

Bennett, Susan.1990. *Theatre Audiences: A theory of Production and Reception.* London and New York: Routledge.

Boal, Augusto. 2008. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Pluto Press.

Bogart, Anne. 2014. *What's the Story: Essays about Art, Theatre and Storytelling.* New York: Routledge.

Case, Sue-Ellen.1988. *Theatre and Feminism.* London: Routledge.

Coleman, Bud. 2017. "New Horizons: The Musical at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century". *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Eds, William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics". *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 1:8.

Diamond, Elin. 1988. "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism", *TDR.* 32:1.

Dolan, Jill. 1988. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic.* University of Michigan Press.

Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* University of Michigan Press.

Evans, Greg. 2021. *March On Broadway Protesters Call for Greater Industry Inclusion & Diversity, Scott Rudin Ouster-Update (Deadline).* Web. https://deadline.com/2021/04/march-on-broadway-list-of-demands-producer-scott-rudin-actors-equity-broadway-league-1234739584/, [accessed May 1 2021].

Giroux, Henry A. 2003. "Utopian Thinking Under the Sign of Neoliberalism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Educated Hope". *Democracy and Nature,* 9:1.

Hadestown. 2020. "Tonight, on #WorldTheatreDay, we raise our cups and dream of a day when we can once again gather together to share an old tale from way back when. #SpringWillComeAgain" *Facebook.* Web. https://fb.watch/5XeKT4Tslk/

Hard, Robin. 2004. *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology: Based on H.J. Rose's "Handbook of Greek Mythology."* Routledge.

Hiltner, Elsa. 2021. *Chris Jones Once Again Fails The Theatre Industry (OnStage Blog).* Web. https://www.onstageblog.com/editorials/2021/4/28/chris-jones, [accessed May 9 2021].

Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation.* Routledge.

Jones, Chris. 2021. *Column: Broadway's capitalist model isn't perfect, but here's why it works, and what can be fixed (Chicago Tribune).* Web. https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/chris-jones/ct-ent-case-for-capitalist-broadway-

20210422-fr7tpsvohnavxfdfuedynzwkuu-story.html, [accessed 29 April 2021].

Joseph, Miranda. 2002. *Against the Romance of Community.* University of Minnesota Press.

Kenrick, John. 2008. *Musical Theatre: A History.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

Larson, Rob. 2018. *Capitalism Vs. Freedom: The Road to Serfdom.* Zero Books.

Lewis, Christian. 2021. One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Broadway's Jagged Little Journey Toward Nonbinary Inclusion (*The Brooklyn Rail).* Web. https://brooklynrail.org/2021/04/theater/One-Step-Forward-Two-Steps-Back-Broadways-Jagged-Little-Journey-Toward-Nonbinary-Inclusion, [accessed May 9 2021].

Nolan, Peter. 2007. *Capitalism and Freedom: The Contradictory Character of Globalisation.* Anthem press.

Mitchell, Anaïs. 2020. *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of Hadestown.* Penguin Random House.

Mouffe, Chantal. 1991. "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community." *Community at Loose Ends,* eds. Miami Theory Collective. University of Minnesota Press.

Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16:3 6-18.

Phelan, Peggy. 1988. "Feminist Theory, Postructuralism, and Performance". *TDR,* 32:1, 107-127.

Schehr, Robert C. 1997. *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement,* Bergin and Garvey.

Scott, Jeremy. 2021. "Restorying: The Creative Act of Retelling". *Narrative Retellings: Stylistic Approaches,* eds. Marina Lambrou. Bloomsbury Academic.

Siegel, Tatiana. *Everyone Just Knows He's an Absolute Monster': Scott Rudin's Ex-Staffers Speak Out on Abusive Behaviour (The Hollywood Reporter).* Web. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/everyone-just-knows-hes-an-absolute-monster-scott-rudins-ex-staffers-speak-out-on-abusive-behavior-4161883/, [accessed 29 April 2021].

Snyder-Young, Dani. 2013. *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change.* Palgrave McMillan.

Solga, Kim. 2016. *Theatre and Feminism.* Red Globe Press.

Speer, Annika C. 2010. "Reviewed Work(s): Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works by Sharon Friedman." *TDR,* vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 232-234.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Bashingstoke, Macmillan.

Taylor, Millie and Dominic Symonds. 2014. *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice.* Red Globe Press.

Wolf, Stacy. 2011. *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Woolford, Julian. 2013. *How Musicals Work (and how to write your own).* Nick Hern Books.

Received: December 13, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 33-51.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A DERRIDEAN APPROACH TO SALLY ROONEY'S *NORMAL PEOPLE* AND *CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS*

Sofía Alférez Mendia
Universidad de Almería

Ireland's progressive liberation from the strict Catholic rule involved a considerable amount of social changes, which have affected gender roles, conventions on marriage, family and even the way that 'love' is approached nowadays (Fine-Davis 2015). In fact, this is what Sally Rooney has so far represented in her novels. As the reader navigates through her two first novels– *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018)–, it becomes more obvious that one of Rooney's main interests is to question much of the normative conducts of affectivity. Her novels present different relationships that struggle to fit in several conventions related to love and affection, starting from monogamy and continuing with social labels attempting to define relations, –such as 'friends', 'lovers', 'married', 'single', etc. –or what Rooney herself called as "prefabricated cultural dynamics" (2017, 306). As explained by her, "[w]e don't have a way of speaking about these non-relationships, where someone is your friend but maybe you [sleep with them]. […] [W]e don't have the vocabulary to describe [it]" (quoted in O'Regan 2017). In that context, this paper analyses these relationships from a philosophical point of view. Specifically, the society which is presented in both Rooney's novels will be

studied as having a structuralist organization, articulated by binary thinking. That is to say, any relation that does not conform to one of the labels previously mentioned is doomed to stay in the private and silent sphere due to the threat that these pose to conventions and normativity. Thereby, these 'unlabelled' relationships that Rooney presents in her novels will be compared to the 'undecidable', as a concept original from the Derridean philosophy, which is understood as an idea that "slip[s] across both sides of [a] [binary] opposition but [doesn't] properly fit either. [It] [is] more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, [it] question[s] the very principle of 'opposition'" (Collins and Mayblin 1993, 38). Following this, the main subject of study, then, will be the representation of such defiant – 'undecidable' – relations in a structuralist society that still intends to lead Western thinking to a binary and, on many occasions, discriminatory mind-set.

Keywords: Relationships; affectivity; undecidability; structuralism; binarism

1. Introduction

In a world recently hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent analysis of interdependence between people, is where the Irish novelist Sally Rooney starts to become more popular specially among young people. Her works revolve around the idea that "there is no 'you' without others" (London Review Bookshop 2019), and this is what makes her contributions match the current worldwide context so precisely.

In reading Rooney's novels, some people might fall into the mistake of thinking them as simple love stories. However, Rooney provides a full portrayal of unconventional–but very natural, and fairly topical–affectionate relationships, which, on many occasions, stay away from the typical romantic approach in love stories. Therefore, due to her unconventional and thought-provoking stories, this article aims to explore the formation of affective relationships as portrayed in her two novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). The main interest is to uncover the terms of the relationships that people–as represented in Rooney's novels–

build and establish in the present generation and society. In other words, the focus is to go beyond the surface of the current relationships' construction, and to explore those unquestionable and deep-rooted codes nourishing the type of relationships that almost everyone has been establishing so far. Some of those codes include the great importance of marriage as an institution that endorses union and 'real' love, and also the normativity of monogamy that the latter enhances.

Starting from her latest novel–*Normal People*–, Rooney depicted an on-again, off-again type of relationship between Marianne, a loner and upper-class girl, and Connell, a popular and middle-class boy whose mother worked as a cleaner at Marianne's in the fictional Irish town of Carricklea. Rooney also explores the concept of normality as affecting Connell and Marianne's relationship, which struggles to fit the social 'normality'. This concept of 'normal'–quite related to the concept of 'convention'–, is going to be central in this research, since it covers all those codes which construct people's relationships, and it certainly has to do with a relationship's capacity to be labelled.

Conversations with Friends, the novel with which Rooney debuted, also revolves around an unconventional love story. Nevertheless, this time the story does not involve only two people, but four; there is Frances, who is both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel; and there is also Bobbi, who is Frances' ex-girlfriend. Despite not being girlfriends anymore, these two characters still keep a tight relationship between them. At the same time, they start to create closer ties with a married couple: Melissa and Nick; and in so doing, they introduce themselves to a polyamorous relationship. Thus, in *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney creates a net of relationships in which every character plays a part, introducing this way a collective or communal perspective of these relations. Again, the topic of normality and normativity jumps out and becomes one of the main issues.

Thus, having briefly introduced these two novels, it is easy to notice that the shared and common idea between both literary pieces is the representation of unconventional relationships and the questioning of the conventional ones. Henceforth, the next section

will deepen in the current social understanding and treatment of affective relationships, both at West and Irish level.

2. Preliminary Aspects

To thoroughly understand the formation of current relationships and its representation in Rooney's novels, special attention will be drawn to the social institutions that regulate them at present, the current understanding of the same and the emergence of new ways of relating and forming families. Among those institutions, it is noteworthy those propelled by the church, such as the nuclear family or traditional marriage.

2.1. The 21st Century West and the Question of Love

Certainly, love–or the way it is understood–has changed over the years, but mostly it has opened up to new forms, as argued by the psychologist Esther Perel in an interview: "the fundamental human need […] for connection […] will never change", but society does change, and as a result of that: "the expressions, […] and the institutions in which we will seek those fundamental human aspirations will continuously transform" (Howes 2020). Accordingly, the changes experimented in society have also affected literature; and this has been notable from the very beginning of the century. As regards the theme of love, it is young adult fiction the genre which has developed the most its representation, and one of the reasons for that is, as argued by Claire Hennessy, that young adult fiction can be considered to be the 21st century bildungsroman (2020).

Thus, love experiences occupy a relevant place. In 2005, Kaplan argued that: "we [were] on the precipice of reinventing ourselves because our young adult books [were] constantly in search of the new and revealing" (11). In fact, one of those searches of the new and revealing is the increasing representation of queer love; young adult fiction appears as the main genre addressing this theme, and it gives space for "typically-neglected voices" (Hennessy 2020). However, what is so revealing is not only the emergence and

increasing representation of the LGTBQ+ collective; that is, 'who to love' is not the only concern of present society, but also 'how to love'. Henceforth, topics such as marriage, divorce, monogamy and polygamy are being discussed and negotiated.

Regarding marriage, it is undeniable that several significant changes have modified the understanding of such institution, however it is not all about differences, one can argue that some aspects have rather stayed the same. For instance, marriage has remained a form of social organization and recognition of 'love' (Evans 2003, 25; Grossi 2014, 29); and in spite of having detached marriage from its religious connotations, this institution, as argued by Diduck and Kaganas, is still considered to be "the ultimate commitment one can make to a sexual or emotional partner" (2012, 36). In fact, if this were not the case, then the legalization of homosexual marriage would have not been considered such a goal (Evans 2003, 25). Therefore, marriage is still "an institution grounded on romantic love" (Grossi 2014, 31). Nevertheless, this institution has changed in that it is no longer attached to its traditional religious connotations, becoming this way more 'secular' and 'contractual' (Grossi 2014, 26). Thus, marriage is not considered to be life-longing anymore, that is, divorce appears as an option for everyone who seems to be unsatisfied with their marriage; so, nowadays one has the right to finish their marriage as soon as it does not meet the personal expectations of one of the parts (Evans 2003).

The slow deconstruction on marriage has done away with values such as the 'forever union', and consequently, this institution has become more irrelevant. In fact, Fineman (2006) argued that the functions and goals that marriage is supposed to fulfil are not being met anymore within marriage, but rather, they are more likely to be fulfilled outside of it by other type of relationships: "less than a quarter of households are made up of married couples and their children" (Grossi 2014, 27); thus, the reality nowadays is that some changes have taken–and keep taking–place in the way people relate to each other.

Having rejected the concept of eternal oneness–quite characteristic of binary thinking–, present society and the current

construction of relationships keep on questioning this concept by opening up to new ways of relating to others, which defy the social mono-normativity. As explained by Rambukkana, monogamy is "something we [have been] stuck on: *loving only one way*" (2015, x). Non-monogamous relationships have been slowly developing since the 1990s, and it is currently still on the move (Klesse 2018). But, as previously mentioned, West society is still ruled and organized by the influence of the monogamous type of intimacy, mainly as a result of Catholic inheritance. In this regard, it is important to note that mono-normativity establishes a set of values on emotions. An instance could be jealousy; mainstream culture very usually represses and demonizes such feeling, as if the mere fact of experiencing it was something to feel ashamed of. Turning over to polyamorists, it is firstly necessary to make clear that they also experience jealousy at some point in their relationships, but instead of demonizing it, they "control, modify and channel" such emotion in order to normalize it (Klesse 2018, 1111); as argued by Deri, "[a]ccording to the polyamorous model, feeling any emotion is appropriate, but acting on that emotion should be tempered with grace" (2015, 30). Furthermore, there is an interesting concept named 'compersion', which was first coined by the San Francisco Kerista community (1971–1991), and it refers to "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another" (quoted in Deri 2015, 32). Therefore, what can be noted is that by introducing and embracing new ways of relating to others, society starts to rewrite the new "rules of love" (Klesse 2018, 1114).

2.2. The 21st Century Ireland and the Question of Love

Now, focusing on the contemporary Irish scope, it is worth drawing attention to Ireland as a society recently "freed" from the traditional ruling power of Catholicism. Its decline is often attributed to different reasons, such as the membership in the European Union in 1973 and the subsequent 'modernisation' of the nation, the international women's movement, or the significant economic growth of the late 20th century, known as the Celtic Tiger, which

contributed to the replacement of the homogenous white and Catholic Ireland with a more culturally diverse Irish society (Fine-Davis 2015). Furthermore, the 1990s clerical sex abuse scandals played a significant part in changing the Irish public opinion on the institution of the church.

As regards the Irish political panorama, the Irish population has "moved away from traditional politics". Most people now "point to the rise of specific interest and identity politics—environmental, morality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and so forth" (Inglis 2014, 104). Indeed, when it comes to social issues, the Irish society has been unquestionably active for the most recent years; and as a result of that, the Irish constitution has recently undergone some reforms that definitely differentiate it from the original version of 1937. In fact, Rooney's novels reflect a completely advanced Irish society in that, as José Francisco Fernández stated, "gay couples no longer cause a stir" (2019, 272). Therefore, it is arguable that Rooney displays in her novels a contemporary Irish social background, which–among other social issues–is pushing forward towards LGBTQ+ matters.

Some of the latest and most meaningful achievements in Ireland have been the legalization of gay marriage in 2015, the legalization of abortion in 2018, and the liberalization of divorce laws in 2019. Now, as regards marriage and family formation, it is arguable that, in spite of the church's decline and divorce legalisation in 1995, people have not undermined marriage, and there still exists an inclination to form families; however, family shapes have changed and, at present, "[t]here are as many different families in Ireland as there are individuals who make them […] yet the notion of "the" family is invoked as if it meant the same thing to everybody" (Inglis 2014, 45). In this sense, it is notable that, as previously argued by Perel, the human need for connection has prevailed over years of changes, but certainly, ways of loving and relating have changed; in the case of Ireland, people still get married and have children, although, as stated by Inglis, not necessarily in that order. Nonetheless, there is a traditional and relevant factor that still seems to affect contemporary Irish families: alcoholism. As one of the major problems of public health in contemporary Ireland, it is usual to find the stereotypical figure of the alcoholic father of a

family in current Irish literature. In fact, in *Conversations with Friends*, Frances' parents are divorced because of that problem, and the reader is occasionally introduced to Frances' childhood memories being assaulted by her father when he came home drunk: "He hurled one of my school shoes right at my face once after he tripped on it. It missed and went in the fireplace […] I learned not to display fear, it only provoked him. I was cold like a fish" (Rooney 2017, 49). This fact also proves that family has acquired different meanings in Ireland: "besides being a site for love and care, the family can also be a place of conflict, violence, and sexual abuse" (Inglis 2014, 55).

Having said that, the context of Rooney's novels appears to be much clearer, and it is therefore not surprising that Rooney is now depicting different non-traditional relationships between young protagonists, which break up with much of the conventions that have been accepted for many years. Indeed, and as she explained, she does not intend to "write a tract on what relationships of the future or even the present moment should look like", but rather she simply portrays "what they do look and feel like" (London Review Bookshop, 2019). In fact, in portraying affective relationships among young characters, she gives little importance to marriage and even criticises the nuclear family portraying it as a space that is hardly ever successful for her protagonists.

3. Methodology

A philosophical study on the representation of affective relationships will be carried out in order to deal with the representation of affective relationships in Sally Rooney's novels. In that sense, the most fundamental theory revolves around the concept of the 'undecidable', as an idea that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida first introduced as a threat to binary oppositions, a concept which, in turn, belongs to the structuralist way of thinking, and that he rejected as part of his contributions and theories (Derrida 2002).

In spite of all recent social changes, it is undeniable that the current social order still keeps many traits of the traditional one:

heterosexuality is still considered to be the norm–let alone monogamy–, plus all existing relationships should apply to the labels society has constructed so far: 'friends', 'lovers', 'married', 'single', etc; in this context, one can argue that those people whose intimacy and relations do not correspond to the normative ones, are bound to undergo difficult experiences and situations in the sphere of affectivity; but at the same time, this sphere is questioned and threatened by these non-normative types of intimacy. Thus, it can be noted that Western society is organized according to a certain order; this social order or understanding is characterized by the presence of binary oppositions, which according to Saussure are "the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one" (Fogarty 2005); furthermore, the terms in an opposition are not equal, but rather, "one of the[m] […] governs the other" (Derrida 1981, 41). In this context, the sphere of affectivity is not an exception, and it does not escape the influence of binarism; the structuralist thinking affects love relationships by reducing the possibilities in which two or more people can interact and construct bonds. For instance, in the single-married opposition, one can either stay single or get married, but not something in between. Therefore, the definitions of the two concepts participating in such a binary opposition are inherently dependent on the differences between them: everything that one term of the opposition is, dictates what the other is not (Collins and Mayblin 2012, 36); in the single-married opposition, the two terms depend on each other to acquire meaning, and everything that a single person can do, a married person cannot.

However, the reality of the relationships people have, very often escapes this binary order, and as explained by Rooney: "[w]e don't have a way of speaking about these non-relationships, where someone is your friend but maybe you [sleep with them]. There is no accepted vocabulary for that. There is a vast array of ways of being with people that we don't have the vocabulary to describe" (quoted in O'Regan 2017). That is, these 'non-relationships' remain unlabelled, they cannot take part of the binary social understanding and very often occupy the space between two binary concepts: "[t]hey slip across both sides of an opposition but don't properly fit

either. They are more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, they question the very principle of 'opposition'" (Collins and Mayblin 1993, 38). In turn, they become undecidable. Now, here is when the discussion of the concept 'normal' begins; it is clear that binarism has set what 'normalcy' is like: everyone should apply for one term of an opposition or the other, that is, whether someone is married or single, partners or friends, etc; and anything or anyone that steps out of the binary opposition, cannot be conceived as 'normal'. In fact, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010), 'normal' is something that "[conforms] to a standard; usual, typical or expected" ('Normal', Stevenson 2010); therefore, this definition sees itself related to that of 'normative', which is defined as something that "[derives] from a standard or norm, specially of behaviour" ('Normative', Stevenson 2010). In this sense, normativity is interwoven in normalcy.

Setting that aside, the very opposite concept to 'normal' or 'normative' is therefore 'abnormal' or 'non-normative', which can be translated into the Derridean philosophical scope as 'undecidability'. In the words of Kristeva, this is 'abjection', it is what remains "radically excluded", and it is "the place where meaning collapses" because "[i]t lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game" (1982, 2). The 'abject' is translated into the Derridean theories as the 'undecidable', and it arose from the effects that his theories had on traditional philosophy and Western thinking; Derrida's philosophy was mostly considered to be a direct attack and critique to the traditional foundations of philosophy, questioning "the usual notions of *truth* and *knowledge*" and it even got to question "the *authority* of philosophy" (Collins and Mayblin 2012, 21). Nevertheless, the point of interest in creating an analogy with his philosophy is not to deepen in Derridean ideas itself, but on the effects that it had on society as a subversive and defying way of thinking which is contrary to traditional ways of structuring reality. That is why these effects can be thought of as analogous to those that the emergence of new types of relationships have on the traditional ones. It is argued that Derrida's philosophy "works to legitimate space for the partial, the messy, the unfinished, the tentative" (Mansfield 2005, 29). It likewise calls into question the

very existence and authority of binary oppositions; and in so doing, he "heightens our awareness of the dangers of oppositional thinking […] in Western metaphysics and the exclusionary ethics and practices that must result from such thinking" (Mansfield 2005, 37-38).

Thus, another important point to make is that the threat of the undecidable has always existed and has always been experienced, but the way it has been dealt with has been different; to take a literary example, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist decided to move away from Mr Rochester after knowing that her relationship with him was doomed to 'unmarriageability' (Phillips 2008, 205), and in so doing, she was showing rejection to stay in a state of undecidability, since she would not be able to marry Mr Rochester, yet their relationship would be romantic. Hence, they would not fit either one term of the opposition–married–, nor the other–single–(Collins and Mayblin 2012).

However, it is in the present society that people are starting to acknowledge and tolerate the existence of the undecidable, and subsequently, defying and questioning the utility of binary thinking. This is why this article will approach Rooney's novels from this perspective, since both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* present current affective relationships that display 'new' and unconventional ways of relating to others that, mostly, escape the binary way of thinking. The following analysis will, therefore, point out the concept of the undecidable within such relationships and the attitudes that it is dealt with, highlighting this way a social tendency towards binarism.

4. Analysis

In representing current Irish society in her novels, Rooney's characters constantly subvert and deal with conventions that do not properly fit them anymore. In other words, even though maintaining unconventional relationships in a society that is still highly regulated by conventions is rather an uncomfortable experience, Rooney's characters manage to, somehow, deal with it. In this light, the aspect to analyse is the existing social structure that defines–or at least,

attempts to define–the type of relationships constructed both in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*.

To begin with, one of the most important aspects that characters in both novels try to implement is that of attaining 'normalcy' within their relationships, that is, to try and conventionalise them; characters try to have a 'normal' relationship, but to be more exact, what they actually want to have, is a normative relationship, that is, a relationship that fits the structuralist perspective, and subsequently, applies to binarism. For instance, in *Conversations with Friends*, at some point, Frances attempts to move away from her 'abnormal' relationship with Nick to try and start a more 'normal' one with another man she meets through a mobile app, and even if she does not feel quite convinced of what she is doing, she tries to persuade herself by thinking it is 'normal': "Afterwards he invited me back to his apartment and I let him unbutton my blouse. I thought: this is normal. This is a normal thing to do" (Rooney 2017, 208). The awkwardness of meeting someone via a mobile application does not appear for Frances to be as weird or unacceptable as constructing a relationship with a married man, given that her relationship with Nick would never allow her to get married or be single, their relationship is rather something in between.

It can be clearly seen that Frances' wish is to conform to what society dictates as 'normal' rather than what she personally feels or thinks 'normal'. In the case of *Normal People*, a significant example is when Connell starts a completely mono-normative relationship with Helen to demonstrate himself, but most importantly the rest of society, that his relationship was 'normal': "Helen is the first girlfriend he has introduced to his mother and he finds he's curiously eager to impress on Lorraine how normal their relationship is" (Rooney 2018, 156). Thus, it is important to notice that using the word 'normal' in an attempt to refer to something normative naturalises, to some extent, social norms that have nothing to do with reality; for instance, monogamous relationships are the most 'normal' type of relationships nowadays, but as argued by Rooney herself, these do not "[reflect] people's real experiences" (London Review Bookshop 2019). In other words, in the context of Rooney's

works, the word 'normal' naturalises mono-normativity, or what Nathan Rambukkana called: "*loving only one way*" (2015, x) (original italics). In that sense, Rooney's characters, as she argues, are actually 'normal' in that "nothing that happens to them is exceptional at all, everything that they undergo is just mundane" (London Review Bookshop 2019). However, the things they undergo, although mundane and banal, do not conform to the present narratives of normativity because they do not fit binarism. In that sense, normalcy–as displayed in Rooney's novels–is much more related to normativity and binarism, and subsequently, to what can be expected, but it is much less related to what is usual or typical, given that monogamy, along history, "was never actually the reality of how people lived their lives, that is how we said we were living our lives, but it's not reflected in people's real experiences" (London Review Bookshop 2019).

Now, leaving aside the previous discussion, it is time now to look at the way in which characters deal with the undecidable in their relationships. As it was previously mentioned, there exists a tendency towards binarism, and this is exactly the attitude that Rooney reflects in her novels through some of her characters. To begin with, in *Normal People*, it is Connell the character that seems to crave for 'normalcy' the most, henceforth, he is also the character that tries the most to adapt his relationships to the social binary understanding, that is, he feels the necessity to escape the uncertainty that being in an 'undecidable' type of relationship carries. In fact, that is the reason why he starts dating Helen: "Connell thinks the aspects of himself that are most compatible with Helen are his best aspects: his loyalty, his basically practical outlook, his desire to be thought of as a good guy. With Helen he doesn't feel shameful things, he doesn't find himself saying weird stuff during sex", and on the contrary, "Marianne had a wildness that got into him for a while and made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnameable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world" (Rooney 2018, 169). Therefore, escaping from his relationship with Marianne was a form of escaping from 'undecidability' and adapting himself to the binary thinking. When he is with Helen, he is no longer uncertain about the nature of his relationship because it is socially thought to be

"normal, a good relationship. The life they were living was the right life" (170), and it becomes clear from the first moment he dates her that she is his girlfriend, whereas Marianne is never considered to be his girlfriend: "she was not even his ex-girlfriend. She was nothing." (110) That is why the reader can find Connell wondering about his relationship with Marianne throughout the whole novel.

On another note, it is also interesting to see that the 'undecidable' state of Connell and Marianne's relationship is not an inner issue, meaning that friends and family are also aware of the 'strange' relation they have; what is most important is that, far from just being aware of it and accept their relationship as it is, society tends to label it and make it fit in either one side of the opposition or another–romance or friendship:

> When did you two split up, then? Lorraine [Connell's mother] asked him.
> We were never together.
> […]
> Young people these days, I can't get my head around your relationships.
> You're hardly ancient.
> When I was in school, she said, you were either going out with someone or you weren't. (125)

This scene is probably one of the most representatives of binary thinking, since Lorraine expresses the impossibility to understand a relationship that does not fit either romance nor friendship. Another character sharing this attitude is Helen:

> It doesn't have to be weird that she's your ex, Helen said.
> She's not my ex. We're just friends.
> But before you were friends, you were…
> Well, she wasn't my girlfriend, he said.
> But you had sex with her, though. (166)

Again, this dialogue represents how complex it is to understand Connell and Marianne's relationship following the rule of binarism. In fact, the reader can easily notice that not even the protagonists can understand it.

This 'undecidable' type of relationship is also represented in *Conversations with Friends*, and it is Frances and Bobbi's

relationship the one that usually stands in the middle of friendship and romance, it does not fit either one thing or the other, and it is also both things at the same time. At the beginning of the novel, it might seem that Bobbi is just a friend of Frances, however, their relationship turns out to be much more special–or complex–as the novel progresses. Just as in *Normal People*, Rooney represents a society that almost needs to make Bobbi and Frances' relationship fit in either romance or friendship: "Marianne [a friend of Bobbi and Frances] saw us holding hands in college one day and said: you're back together! We shrugged. It was a relationship, and also not a relationship" (303). Thus, it is again the same dilemma that Connell and Marianne from *Normal People* have to deal with. However, in the case of Bobbi, she seems to understand much more the nature of her relationship with Frances than Connell and Marianne understand their own. As a result of this, Bobbi is capable of tolerating and managing her relationship with Frances more easily. In fact, there are some scenes along the novel in which the reader gets to know about Bobbi's clear ideas on her relationship with Frances:

> Who even gets married? Said Bobbi. […] Who wants state apparatuses sustaining their relationship?
> I don't know. What is ours sustained by?
> That's it. That's exactly what I mean. Nothing. Do I call myself your girlfriend? No. Calling myself your girlfriend would be imposing some prefabricated cultural dynamic on us that's outside our control. (305-6)

At first, Bobbi's ideas might seem quite radical, but still, chances are that there is some truth in what she says. Binary thinking supports and fosters what Bobbi describes as "prefabricated cultural dynamics" (306), given that people are to organize their relationships according to already existing labels; and if there is something that Rooney makes clear in both her novels is that the creation of genuine relationships with other people will hardly comply with all the rules that one label establishes for a certain type of relationship, henceforth, existing labels will hardly fit or represent the dynamic of every relationship. In this context, these state apparatuses are just a forced attempt to regulate a diverse society and turn it into a more uniform and homogeneous one: easier to control. This is why the 'undecidable' type of relationships

displayed in both novels represent a problem both for characters and society.

To finish this analysis, it is also worth noting that both novels have an open-end, meaning that the 'undecidable' cannot be solved by the end of both stories. Furthermore, it also represents the willingness of 21st century writers, such as Rooney, to cope with the unfinished and the uncertain, that is, to subvert the conventional and pave the way for a new mindset.

5. Conclusion

Overall, it may be said in the first place that, as can be seen in Rooney's novels, the theme of 'love' and the construction of affective relationships are still two topics of interest for current authors as much as it was for authors from past centuries. This interest arises from the variability and changing aspect of the same. Previous conceptualisation of marriage presented marriage as the major and culminating representation of love; however, current writers, such as Rooney, see this institution as rather irrelevant or at least, not so meaningful.

Rooney has presented different issues to call into question, being mono-normativity one of the most significant ones. In that sense, she even reflects on how not only behaviour, but also feelings–especially that of jealousy–are extremely regulated–or even, to some extent, provoked – by social norms. Thus, she challenges the internalization of aspects concerning the way people relate to others; this is something she clearly portrayed at the end of *Conversations with Friends* when she writes: "Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, […] [a] complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them" (Rooney 2017, 321). In this way she highlights Frances' little understanding or realization of her feelings and behaviour in terms of the norms that actually regulate them. In other words, Rooney attempts to represent conventions–such as monogamy–as a 'network' that characters assume and participate in without even knowing what is behind them.

In this context, it is interesting to also mention that Rooney, as a modern Irish author, represents the current situation of Ireland as a country and society that goes ahead with different social issues; in fact, it is arguable that this is the reason why Rooney's novels are not only well-known in Ireland, but also, these are internationally well-acclaimed, meaning that the themes she deals with are not only topics of interest for the Irish society, but also for the European society, in general.

Accordingly, it can be argued that the matters she presents regarding affective relationships are topical issues for controversial discussions, and possibly, in process of study and development for the next years. A reading of literature combining philosophy and its opportunities may facilitate a more in-depth understanding of how societies evolve and where the foundations of the same lie.

References

Collins, Jeff and Bill Mayblin. 2012. *Introducing Derrida: A Graphic Guide*. Cambridge: Icon Books.

Deri, Jillian. 2015. *Love's Refraction. Jealousy and Compersion in Queer Polyamorous Relationships.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1981. *Positions*. Trans. By Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—. 2002. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. By Alan Bass. London: Routledge.

Diduck, Alison and Felicity Kaganas. 2012. *Family Law, Gender and the State: Text, Cases and Materials.* Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Evans, Mary. 2003. *Love: An Unromantic Discussion*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fernández, José Francisco. 2019. "Conversations with Friends". *Estudios Irlandeses*, 14: 271-273. Web. <https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DEF.Round-the-World.pdf> [Accessed on December 6, 2021]

Fine-Davis, Margret. 2015. *Gender Roles in Ireland: Three Decades of Attitude Change*. New York: Routledge.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2006. "The Meaning of Marriage." In *Marriage Proposals: Questioning a Legal Status*. Eds. Anita Bernstein. New York and London: NYU Press: 29-69.

Fogarty, Sorcha. 2005. *Binary Oppositions*. Web. <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=122> [Accessed December 6, 2021]

Grossi, Renata. 2014. "Love and Marriage." *Looking for Love in the Legal Discourse of Marriage*. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press: 17–38.

Hennesy, Claire. 2020. *The Irish Times: YA fiction: the best of 2020*. Web. <www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/ya-fiction-the-best-of-2020-1.4440478> [Accessed April 25, 2021]

Howes, Lewis. "The Lies We Tell Ourselves About Monogamy and Relationships with Esther Perel and Lewis Howes." YouTube video, 16:52, July 14, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MoZPZlygxJI> [Accessed May 23, 2021]

Inglis, Tom. 2014. *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kaplan, Jeffrey. 2005. "Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century: Moving Beyond Traditional Constraints and Conventions". *The ALAN Review*, 32.2: 11-18.

Klesse, Christian. 2018. "Theorizing Multi-Partner Relationships and Sexualities – Recent Work on Non-Monogamy and Polyamory". *Sexualities*, 21.7: 1109–112

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. By Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

London Review Bookshop. "Sally Rooney talks to Kishany Widyaratna about 'Normal People.'" YouTube video, 01:16:16. May 8, 2019. <https://youtu.be/4jH_0rg46Es> [Accessed December 6, 2021].

Mansfield, Janet. 2005. "Difference, Deconstruction, Undecidability: A Derridian Interpretation". *ACCESS: Critical Perspectives on Communication, Cultural & Policy Studies*, 24.1: 29 – 39.

O'Regan, Nadine. 2017. *More Life & Arts: Sally Rooney Has Plenty to Talk About*. Web. <https://www.businesspost.ie/more-life-arts/sally-rooney-has-plenty-to-talk-about-8e906466> [Accessed November 21, 2021].

Phillips, James. 2008. "Marriage in Jane Eyre: From Contract to Conversation". *Brontë Studies*, 33.3: 203-217.

Rambukkana, Nathan. 2015. *Fraught Intimacies. Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere*. Vancouver, Toronto: University of British Columbia Press.

Rooney, Sally. 2017. *Conversations with Friends*. London: Faber&Faber.

—. 2018. *Normal People*. London: Faber&Faber.

Received: December 7, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 53-79.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

TELECOLLABORATIVE EXCHANGES AND HIGHER EDUCATION: NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SPANISH AND JAPANESE STUDENTS

Patricia Guill-Garcia
Universitat de València

This article presents an analysis of Negotiation of Meaning (NoM) episodes found in three audiovisual telecollaborative interactions. The study was conducted within the VELCOME project, which carried out a telecollaborative partnership between Japanese (Kwansei Gakuin University) and Spanish (Universitat de València) students. The main objective is to ascertain the presence of NoM episodes in these audiovisual telecollaborative experiences, together with determining the relevance and nature of said episodes.

A mixed methodology is employed in this study, since the quantitative results provide the basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis of the data. The NoM episodes were analysed based on Smith's (2003, 2005) expansion of the model of Negotiation of Meaning formulated by Varonis and Gass (1985). In addition, the triggers found in the corpus were later on classified into two categories: attended and unattended. Then, so as to determine if students avoid attending mistakes or issues of a specific nature, the attended and unattended triggers were classified into different categories (linguistic, content-related, technical problems, material-

related, and overlapping). Finally, the attended triggers were likewise classified as resolved or unresolved as a manner to determine the success of students at solving these breakdowns.

The findings obtained suggest that NoM episodes represent a relevant portion of the interactions, emphasising the significance of these breakdowns in communicative processes. Hence, this may imply that further insights into the presence of these NoM episodes and their pedagogical implications are needed, especially in the context of highly communicative activities such as telecollaboration.

Keywords: Telecollaboration; tertiary education; Negotiation of Meaning; foreign language learning; communication

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, more and more teachers, practitioners, and scholars have been attempting to implement ICTs in the language classroom through a diversity of innovative approaches. As Chapelle expounds, "the march of technology throughout all aspects of the lives of language learners is expanding whether it be through formal education or in their everyday lives" (2007, 108). Accordingly, it is due to its ubiquitous nature that technology has evolved until becoming a crucial aspect in the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

Likewise, communicative competence has gained growing recognition in recent research on foreign language teaching (Bou-Franch 2001, 1). Indeed, communication and its acquisition in the L2 classroom have become the "overarching learning objective", aside from a determining aspect for the potential success of students (Hoffstaedter and Kohn 2015, 1).

As a result, it has been widely argued in research that communication may be successfully integrated into language teaching through ICTs, given that some configurations have the potential to trigger "unlimited input and repetition", offer opportunities for "modifying input", and provide students with

"interaction and negotiation of meaning" episodes (Chun 2016, 101).

Thus, an example of a technology-enhanced configuration with a strong focus on communication is telecollaboration. Apart from being reasonably new (Hrastinski & Keller 2007, 62), this learning tool has gained growing recognition in research and has been examined through various standpoints (Clavel-Arroitia 2019, 99). Nevertheless, and apart from all the positive outcomes previously mentioned in the literature, scholars have determined that telecollaborative exchanges may foster the unleashing of Negotiation of Meaning (NoM) episodes (Bower & Kawaguchi 2011; Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck 2015a, 2015b; Lee 2001, 2006; O'Dowd 2007a; Smith 2003, 2005), which are found in interactive processes when triggers or "breakdowns in communication" (Bower & Kawaguchi 2011, 44) are addressed and treated. The growing attention that these communicative breakdowns are receiving in the contexts of SLA and TEFL derives precisely from the multiple benefits that they potentially offer for the acquisition of conversational competence (Bou-Franch 2001) and its integration in the foreign language classroom.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse three audiovisual telecollaborative exchanges between students from Kwansei Gakuin University (Japan) and Universitat de València (Spain). Consequently, the analysis will be conducted through the identification and description of NoM episodes (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Smith, 2003, 2005), together with a classification of the triggers found in the corpus so as to further explore the presence and relevance of NoM in these audiovisual telecollaborative experiences.

2. Theoretical framework

Telecollaboration has been defined by Guth and Helm (2012, 42) as an "Internet based intercultural exchange […] set up in an institutional blended-learning context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence". This definition alludes to some of the main purposes and

pedagogical implications of these activities and, hence, some aspects mentioned need to be further clarified. First and foremost, one of the core features of telecollaboration is the "institutional" setting in which these activities are developed. As previously mentioned, the integration of activities that motivate the acquisition of communicative and digital competences in curricular language lessons is gradually becoming crucial. Furthermore, making students able to receive L2 input from interactive processes could provide them with wider opportunities for improvement. In the case of those students who normally receive all the input from their teacher-centred lessons or are unable to participate in any other intercultural exchanges, these interactions may provide them with additional occasions to practice (Clavel Arroitia & Pennock-Speck 2015a, 191).

Another element to highlight from Guth and Helm's description is the applicability of this approach to contexts where "blended-learning" methodologies are employed. As expounded by Graham, blended learning approaches "combine face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction" (2006, 5), merging the adaptability and innovation of technology with the social and economic accessibility of on-site lessons (Thorne 2003, Bañados 2006). As previously mentioned, telecollaboration has the potential to provide teachers and practitioners with befitting instruments for the integration of both communication and technology in face-to-face teaching environments. Consequently, the outcomes and pretensions of telecollaboration are analogous to those of blended-learning approaches.

Even though telecollaborative exchanges are generally described under the same definition, it is crucial to bear in mind that every exchange is completely different and is characterised by various unique features. There are different categorisations in which we can classify telecollaborative exchanges. One of them is the distinction between synchronous (real-time exchanges, namely those taking place in videoconference software and online chats) and asynchronous tools (e.g., e-mails and forums) (O'Dowd 2007a, 12). Additionally, these conversations can be carried out both orally and in written contexts.

It is important to bear in mind these differences, since the structure and procedures of the conversation may be modified according to these variables. "In synchronous text chats, for instance, there is a high degree of disrupted adjacency, overlapping exchanges, and topic decay" (Herring 1999; cited by Chun 2011, 394), while these aspects will not be present to the same extent in audiovisual telecollaborative interactions. Another example is presented by Jauregi (2015, 271), whose research conducted within the Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (TILA) project revealed that "(v)ideo communication seems to stimulate more complex discourse production than chat encounters and might be more useful for stimulating richer intercultural exchanges than chat". Nevertheless, synchronous audiovisual interaction could submit students to higher levels of stress and anxiety (Jauregui 2015, 271).

Additionally, there are other typologies of telecollaborative exchanges that do not involve the tool utilised, but the languages used in the interactions. Students have the possibility of participating in tandem exchanges, which are those between "students with different mother tongues taking turns to teach and learn each other's mother tongue" (Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck 2015b, 75). In consequence, these exchanges present some "expert" figures (native speakers) who guide and counsel non-native speakers (Hoffstaedter and Kohn, n.d.).[1] Conversely, there is another kind of telecollaborative exchange that is known as *lingua franca* which takes place between students whose L1 is different from the one used in the interaction (Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck 2015b, 75).

Despite the wide variety of telecollaborative exchanges reported in research, telecollaboration has been generally valued as a beneficial tool for language pedagogy. Some of its affordances are autonomous learning (Pérez-Cañado 2010, Vinagre 2007), differenciation (Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia 2018), the

[1]https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jztj_oVcJ9LMxmUWu78eAg41O-VYMHkI/view

acquisition of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (O'Dowd 2003, 2007b), motivation (Canto, Jauregi, and Bergh 2013; Pennock-Speck and Clavel-Arroitia 2018; Pérez Cañado 2010, Schenker 2012), and so on. Nonetheless, there is one outcome that becomes crucial for the conducting of this piece of research. Due precisely to the presence of authentic communication in telecollaborative exchanges, telecollaboration has growingly been studied under the purview of the interactionist approach. More specifically, some studies have focused on a component of interaction known as Negotiation of Meaning (NoM). This recognition of NoM episodes in SLA research has flourished due to the fact that previous studies have demonstrated that these are unleashed during telecollaborative exchanges (Bower & Kawaguchi 2011; Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck 2015a, 2015b; Lee 2001, 2006; O'Dowd 2007a; Smith 2003, 2005). Said episodes take place when there is a trigger in an interaction, or, in the words of Bower and Kawaguchi, when "a breakdown in communication" occurs (2011, 44).

The interest in these NoM episodes in SLA and TEFL contexts is expanding because it is considered "the most helpful way for learners to acquire new words when completing CALL tasks with another learner" (Smith 2005, 54). Hence, NoM episodes could be beneficial for the acquisition of vocabulary in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) contexts. According to Smith (2003, 39), another outcome of NoM episodes in L2 learners is their need to alter their utterances in order to make themselves understood. This way, they pay more attention to the principal issues that they may encounter while interacting with their peers and become more aware of the "gaps in their knowledge" (Wilkinson 2001, cited by Clavel-Arroitia, 2019). In this same line, NoM episodes may imply explicit corrective feedback between interactants, hence stimulating the acquisition of comprehensible input (Long, 1983; Krashen, 1992). Consequently, students would be able to produce "pushed output" (Swain, 1985), i.e. a broader lexical richness could be produced, since participants are being motivated to use those vocabulary items that they do not normally resort to in the first place. As a result, incidental acquisition of knowledge can be facilitated by exposing students to these NoM episodes (Ellis 1999, 4).

Due to the growing recognition of NoM in research, several methodologies to analyse this element of interaction have aroused. A widely used model for the identification of NoM episodes is that of Varonis and Gass (1985). According to this bipartite model, attended NoM episodes can be divided into two parts: a trigger (the utterance that caused the communicative breakdown) and a resolution phase. Likewise, the resolution is also divided into three subparts: an Indicator (I), or the moment in which a speaker indicates the problem; a response (R), which takes place when the other interactants attempt to solve the issue; and a reaction to the response (RR), when the first speaker confirms that the problem has been solved. The latter is an optional move, which means that some NoM episodes may not present it.

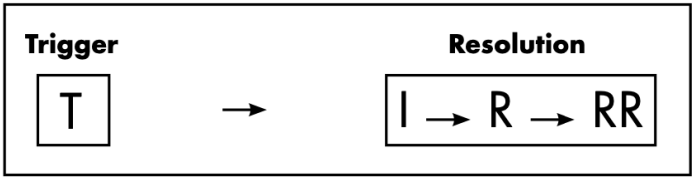


Figure 1: Model of Negotiation of Meaning formulated by Varonis and Gass (1985, 74)

Hence, a conversation is illustrated as a continuous line in this model. When interactants face a trigger, they detour from this straight line until they have solved the non-understanding and can eventually redirect the conversation. Nevertheless, and although this taxonomy has been widely used in research, the main focus of this model is on face-to-face interaction. As Loewen and Sato point out in their review, "the use of technology in communication has expanded the purview of interactionist research" (2018, 312), which implies that this model may need some modifications to apply it to communication in virtual environments. So as to find a way to fittingly study CMC communication, this model was expanded by Smith (2003, 2005). In his research, he explained that CMC differed in some aspects from face-to-face interaction, one of them being the non-adjacent nature of turns in virtual interaction. Since the turn-taking procedures of CMC do not follow such an organised order as in face-to-face conversation, it can be understood that the distance

between the trigger and its subsequent resolution is more notorious in CMC contexts. Moreover, Smith also pointed out that participants facing a NoM episode in virtual environments need an explicit "indication of understanding" (Smith 2003, 48–49), allowing them to explicitly state that the NoM episode has concluded before carrying on with the conversation. In consequence, Smith added two more stages to the resolutions phase: a confirmation (C) and a reconfirmation (RC).

3. Methodology

As already mentioned, the main purpose of this paper is to identify and analyse the presence of NoM episodes in three exchanges carried out in a partnership between university students. The interactions to be scrutinised in the following parts of this paper have been retrieved, as mentioned above, from a partnership carried out in the context of the VELCOME project.[2] The aim of this project is to "analyse and assess the effects that integrating virtual exchange (VE) as an innovative teaching method can have on the development of key competences for lifelong learning and employability (European Commission, 2018) of students in EMI (English Medium of Instruction) classrooms" (Vinagre, n.d). For this reason, several partnerships were carried out between Spanish and international institutions at all education levels making use of different synchronous and asynchronous tools.

The participants of the exchange studied in this paper were students from Kwansei Gakuin University (Japan) and Universitat de València (Spain). There was a total of 45 participants (23 Japanese and 22 Spanish students), who were divided into groups of four or five to carry out the main task of the partnership, forming a total of 11 groups.

[2] Virtual Exchange for Learning and Competence Development in EMI Classrooms, 2019-2021. RTI2018-094601-B-100. Project "Retos", Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades.

A determining aspect of this project is that the conversations were carried out during the COVID-19 outbreak, meaning that each student stayed at their respective residences while completing the activity.

Regarding the organisation of the exchange, it was divided into three parts: a pre-task, a main task, and a post-task. This structure was selected because it follows the structure of activities in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) contexts. In the pre-task, students were asked to introduce themselves via e-mail and speak to their peers so as to agree on a date and time to meet for the main task. In this part, they also carried out a Zoom session with their respective instructors, who explained the activity and allowed them to have some time to gather ideas that they could use for the main task. At this point, students were provided with a PDF document with some questions and images that they could use as a guide during the conversation. The main task was the actual conversation, in which students were asked to talk for an hour about a specific topic via Zoom videoplatform. Students were also encouraged to digress and comment on other ideas if they wanted, together with the fact that they were given no time limits. Nevertheless, most of the conversations were close to an hour, the shortest one being 45 minutes long and the longest an hour and 45 minutes approximately. Finally, in the post-task students were asked to write a short text concerning their views on the experience and to answer a questionnaire. Due to space constraints, this paper will only deal with the data extracted from the main task.

Since this telecollaborative activity was part of both groups' curricula, the main topic to be discussed in the interactions needed to be extracted from their syllabi. Consequently, the topic was "Beliefs and superstitions", not only because it was included in both of their language courses, but also due to the fact that it is a topic that allowed them to compare both cultures. As previously stated, students were also allowed to speak about other open topics during the main task.

For this study, three of the interactions were randomly selected and analysed. These three groups were formed by two Japanese and two Spanish students, excluding one that was formed

by three Japanese students instead of two. Hence, the interactions were carried out by a total of 13 students (7 Japanese and 6 Spanish participants). This analysis has been carried out through the answering of three research questions (RQ):

> *(RQ1)*. How relevant are NoM episodes in the three interactions?
> *(RQ2)*. How many of the triggers found in the corpus were attended?
> *(RQ3)*. How many of the triggers found in the corpus were resolved?

So as to answer these questions, a mixed-methods methodology was carried out combining both quantitative and qualitative data. In this case, all the research questions will be explored through a quantitative study, in which the NoM episodes will be detected in the corpus by making use of Smith's (2003, 2005) adaptation of Varonis and Gass (1985) model. Afterwards, the triggers found will be classified into attended and not attended and, subsequently, the attended triggers will be likewise categorised into resolved and unresolved. Hence, these episodes will be quantified, utilising these data as the basis for a posterior qualitative analysis, which will provide further details about the corpus and the participants. Furthermore, some of the descriptions and evaluations of the results are carried out from the standpoint of a "participant observer" (Freeman and Hall, 2012), since the author of this paper participated in one of the interactions. Nevertheless, the interaction in which the author participated was excluded from the corpus selection to avoid biased results. Consequently, this model of observation will provide further data for the qualitative analysis of the exchanges.

The gathering of data for this paper was carried out through the viewing and subsequent transcription of the recordings. Moreover, the recordings of the interactions were used during the counting process, since the transcriptions alone may not provide enough details or may leave behind relevant aspects to consider. These transcriptions were carried out through the guidelines by Gumperz and Berenz (1993), Atkinson and Heritage (1984), and Langford (1994) and included not only the verbal production of the participants, but also non-verbal cues such as gestures, nodding, or

hand movements. Indeed, most of the non-verbal production observed in the corpus served as a carrier of meaning, consequently becoming necessary for this analysis.

Thus, triangulation is ensured in this study through the incorporation of all these methodologies, and it provides this paper with further details and wider perspectives. As Todd affirms, "the use of multiple measures may […] uncover some unique variance which otherwise may have been neglected by single methods" (1979, 603).

4. Results and discussion

Before determining the importance and presence of NoM episodes in the corpus, it is relevant to look at the degree of participation of each cultural group, or, in other words, the number of moves. These data are shown below in Table 1, where a count of the total moves of each group together with a comparison between the Spanish and Japanese students can be found:

Group 5		**Group 8**		**Group 9**	
734		654		806	
Japanese	**Spanish**	**Japanese**	**Spanish**	**Japanese**	**Spanish**
330 (44.96%)	404 (55.04%)	326 (49.85%)	328 (50.15%)	378 (46.90%)	428 (53.10%)

Table 1: Results for number of moves

This count of moves includes both verbal and non-verbal manifestations. Hence, those instances in which students nodded or made use of gestures were counted in this section as a move, since they also behaved as carriers of meaning on different occasions.

Taking these data and quantifying them as a whole, a total of 2,194 moves were obtained. Furthermore, out of this total, 1,034 moves belonged to Japanese students, while 1,160 were prompted by Spanish students. Thus, 52.87% of the moves were made by Spanish participants and the other 47.13% by Japanese students, as shown in Figure 1 below:

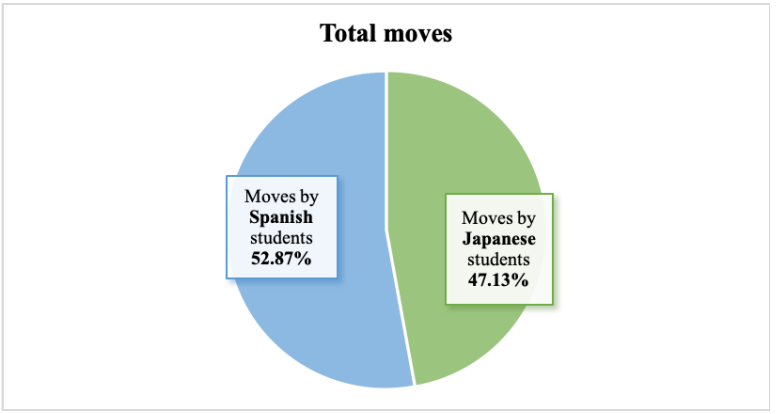


Figure 1: Results for total moves

By focusing on the number of moves prompted by each cultural group, it can be inferred that no relevant differences are perceived from these results, because each group presents a balanced count of moves. Hence, the interactions analysed in this paper may be organised through turn-taking procedures in which one interactant inquires and the rest of participants answer, as illustrated in Example 1 hereunder:

Example 1:
<SPA2> Alright, the unexplained. Ok, so, guys, do you believe in ghosts?
<JAP1> Yes. <smiles>
<SPA1> What about the other ones?
<JAP3> <nods> Ah, yes, yes.
<SPA1> Amy?
<JAP2> Ah? <Clarification request>
<SPA1> Do you believe in ghosts? <Repetition>
<JAP2> <tilts her head> Hm… <nods> Not, not believe.

Nonetheless, if a count of the words uttered by the students in the interactions is carried out, different results are obtained, making it necessary to compare these data. In this second count of moves, any non-verbal cues were excluded in an attempt to determine the levels of production and elaboration of each cultural group's utterances. Thus, Table 2 indicates the word count for each exchange and cultural group.

Group 5		Group 8		Group 9	
4,286		3,686		6,079	
Japanese	**Spanish**	**Japanese**	**Spanish**	**Japanese**	**Spanish**
1,101 (25.69%)	3,185 (74.31%)	1,562 (42.38%)	2,124 (57.62%)	1,799 (29.59%)	4,280 (70.41%)

Table 2: Word count of the interventions.

It can be extracted from these results that the utterances produced by Spanish students presented higher degrees of elaboration if we compare them to those by Japanese participants. According to this count, 68.24% of the words uttered correspond to Spanish participants, while 31.76% were uttered by Japanese interactants.

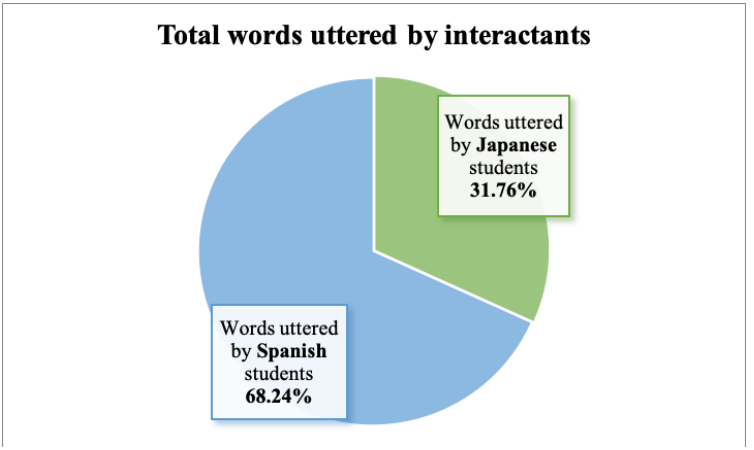


Figure 2: Results for the word count of the interventions

Consequently, these results imply that the oral production of the Spanish students as a whole was superior in quantity to that of Japanese students. There are different ways to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, the Spanish students were older and had studied English for more years, so their proficiency in the language was expected to be slightly higher. In the case of the Japanese students, this may be the reason for the higher amounts of moves carried out through non-verbal communication strategies and the

lack of verbal utterances in some moves, since Spanish students presented "more cognitive resources" (Li, 2014; cited by Loewen and Sato, 2018: 309) due precisely for their higher levels of proficiency. These differences between the linguistic elaboration of Spanish students and the presence of non-verbal communication in the case of the Japanese are illustrated in Example 2:

Example 2:
<SPA2> I am Carlos' classmate and <takes his mic closer> can you hear me? 'Cause sometimes my microphone does not work.
<JAP2 nods>
<JAP3 nods>
<SPA1> Well, that's better.
<SPA2> Ok. <Confirmation> […]

Among these three groups, there is one that presents a more balanced count of words, which is Group 8. A feature that characterises this specific conversation is that there was a strong presence of the Japanese language, since the Japanese students here tended to solve NoM episodes by translating words or asking each other questions in their native language. Accordingly, Spanish students were not able to take part in these NoM episodes, since they could not speak Japanese, explaining the higher number of words in the case of the utterances prompted by Japanese students in this group. Example 3 below instantiates this phenomenon:

Example 3:
<SPA3> <louder> What other things bring bad luck or [good] luck in Japan? <chuckles> <Repetition>
<JAP5> [Ok.] Ok. Ok, I got it. Ah…
<SPA3 and SPA4 chuckle>
<JAP5 speaks to JAP4 in Japanese> <Code switching>
<JAP4> Ah… Ahhh… <looks left>
<JAP5 speaks to JAP4 in Japanese> <looks down>

Now that deeper insights about our corpus have been provided and having described how these interactions proceeded, it is necessary to move on to the answering of our research questions. The results previously presented are crucial for the answering of research question 1 (*How relevant NoM episodes are in the three interactions?*), since it is necessary to know these aspects in order to calculate the percentage of presence of NoM episodes in the

corpus. Once the NoM episodes were identified by means of Smith's (2003, 2005) adaptation of Varonis and Gass' model (1985), these results were extracted:

	Group 5	Group 8	Group 9
Number of NoM episodes	106	92	147
Word count of NoM episodes	2,211 (53.92%)	1,975 (53.58%)	2,804 (46.13%)

Table 3: Results of NoM episodes on each interaction.

Perceiving all these results as a whole, 50.46% of the corpus (7,090 words) were essentially negotiated turns, hence constituting a heavily important portion of these interactions. These results contrast with those of Smith (2003, 45), who found that NoM episodes constituted 34% of his corpus, which was formed by different online written conversations. Probably these different results are due to the presence of different media in these interactions. As Lee (2001, 234) explains, "it is assumed that during the online negotiation process learners experience input, feedback and output in a way similar to that of face-to-face interaction". Hence, it may be this similarity between face-to-face interaction and audiovisual telecollaborative exchanges what has triggered this high presence of NoM episodes. Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that CMC and face-to-face communication are not identical, so the NoM episodes' number may have been magnified in this corpus due to the proper constraints of communication in online environments.

Once the relevance of NoM episodes in the corpus has been determined, the answer to research question 2 (*How many of the triggers found in the corpus were attended?*) must be discussed. Coming up with an answer for this question is essential in order to obtain more details about the presence of resolution stages in these NoM episodes and their development.

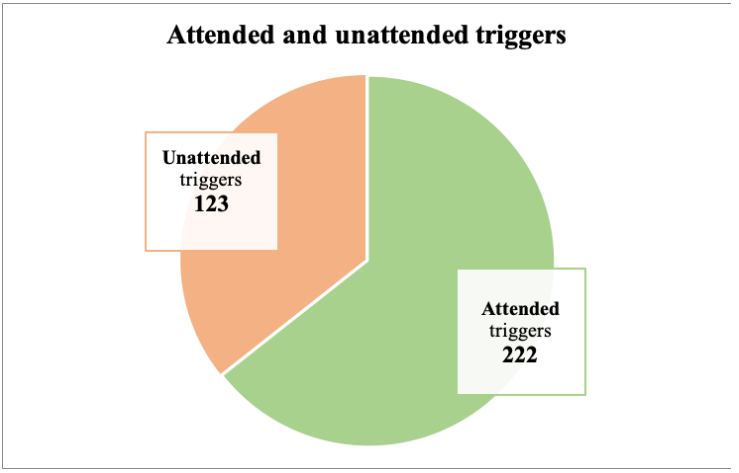


Figure 3: Results for the attended and unattended triggers

In this case, there is a higher number of attended triggers, which implies that the commitment of students when attempting to solve communicative issues was prominent. 222 out of the total of 345 triggers (64.35%) were attended, while 35.65% of them were ignored by students. So as to disclose the reasons behind the unattended triggers found in the corpus, they were categorised into 5 possible groups, namely linguistic triggers, content related difficulties, technical problems, issues regarding the materials of the task, and overlapping episodes.

Classification	Total	Attended	Unattended
Linguistic	**167**	45	122
Content	**153**	151	2
Technical problem	**13**	13	0
Materials	**3**	3	0
Overlapping	**9**	9	0

Table 4: Results of the categorization of triggers

It is imperative to indicate at this point that the NoM episodes quantified in this research include not only issues related to the contents of a conversation, linguistic aspects, or misunderstandings, but also those concerning technical issues, interruptions by students, and materials for the completion of the task. The decision to include these episodes in the final count was based on the fact that they all followed a pattern of resolution similar to that of linguistic triggers.

As represented in Table 4, the vast majority of unattended triggers were those of linguistic nature, since only 45 out of the 167 linguistic issues identified in the corpus were addressed (26.95%). As a result, most of the linguistic triggers were unattended by students, as 121 triggers of this nature (73.05%) were ignored. Once more, as illustrated by Table 4, there is a great difference between the results regarding linguistic triggers and those from other categories. Example 4 represents how students continued the conversation without attending these triggers:

> *Example 4:*
> *<JAP6> Sorry. <smiling> Thank you. I'm Lisa, I live in Japan, in… Hyogo, <unintelligible> ah, in… My house is… in the countryside, very countryside. Ahh… My hobby is…* watching movie (Linguistic. Unattended) *and…* listening music (Linguistic. Unattended). *Ahh… Hm.. I want to know Spanish culture and Spanish… Hm…* Spanish story (Linguistic. Unattended). *Ah, nice to meet you!*
> *<SPA5> Nice to meet you!*

The main explanation for these results may be the fact that the presence of linguistic issues could not be perceived by students as relevant enough to be solved as other problems from other categories. According to Clavel-Arroitia (2019, 105), whose results were quite similar to those presented in this paper, interactants in telecollaborative exchanges "seem to be able to understand each other well enough to go on with the interaction and therefore most of the mistakes […] do not lead to a breakdown in communication or comprehension problems". Since students in these interactions do not focus on linguistic correction and make use of the language as a functional tool, they may believe that addressing said triggers is not a determining factor for their success in the main task. Additionally, students may leave some linguistic triggers unattended due to politeness or cultural beliefs, since a certain degree of explicit

correction is needed in order to address triggers of this nature (Bower & Kawaguchi 2011, 61). As a result, probably some students overlooked certain linguistic mistakes in order to avoid conflicts or politeness issues.

The count of attended and unattended triggers from each of the three interactions is presented in Table 5, which illustrates how this prevalence of unattended linguistic triggers is a shared feature in each of the three main tasks analysed in this study.

	Group 5		Group 8		Group 9	
Type of trigger	**Att.**	**Unatt.**	**Att.**	**Unatt.**	**Att.**	**Unatt.**
Linguistic	22	24	9	36	15	61
Content	55	2	36	0	60	0
Technical problem	1	0	8	0	4	0
Material	2	0	1	0	0	0
Overlapping	0	0	2	0	7	0

Table 5. Results of the attended and unattended triggers of each interaction

Now that some aspects concerning attended and unattended triggers have been expounded, the last research question (*How many of the triggers found in the corpus were resolved?)* should be addressed. Although most of the triggers were attended, it is important to bear in mind that it does not imply that all of the attended triggers were solved. It could be the case that students are unable to solve a problem, no matter the efforts they make. As illustrated by Figure 4, 6.76% (15 out of 221) of the attended triggers were unresolved. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the triggers (207, 93.24%) were resolved, coinciding with Clavel-Arroitia (2019, 105), whose results presented 93.7% of resolved communication breakdowns.

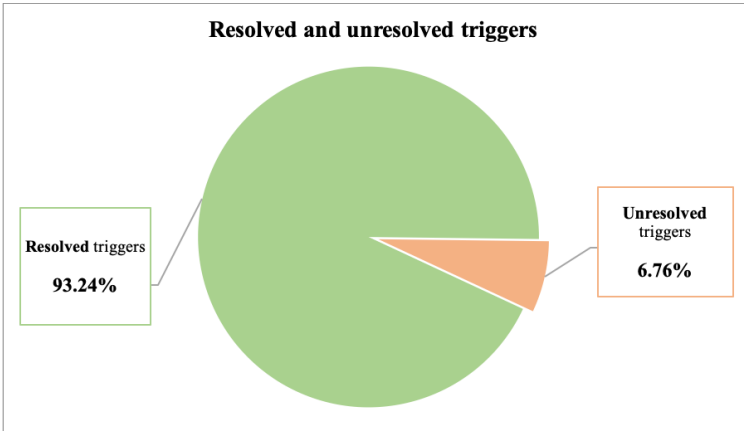


Figure 4: Results for the resolved and unresolved triggers

These results illustrate the effort that participants made not only at making themselves understood and understanding the others, but also at solving the issues that emerged, up to a point where almost the totality of attended triggers was resolved.

The less attended triggers, which were the linguistic ones, were actually resolved in most of the cases. In fact, only 4 out of 122 were not solved by students. One of the unresolved linguistic triggers occurred while a Japanese student was attempting to define the term "reincarnation". In this case, one of the Spanish students (SPA1) does not paraphrase or attempt to explain the concept in their own words. Instead, they shift to a different topic, in this case asking if they believe in reincarnation, leaving the trigger unresolved.

Example 5:
<JAP3> Uhm… Next… <hands> change, like ah, ah... insect, or maybe animals, so… <hands like a circle> change, change our… like, the cycle. So, uh… [I believe, I believe it.] (Linguistic. Attended. Unresolved)
<SPA1> Hm. [What you…] You believe in re- rein- reincarnation? <chuckles> Do you believe it? <Topic shift>
<JAP2> Yes, <nodding> yes.
<SPA1> Ok. <nods> <Confirmation>

The other three unresolved linguistic triggers took place due to failed attempts of self-correction. In these cases, students made a

mistake and attempted to correct themselves, although their correction was not correct either. This means that, despite their efforts to correct themselves, they were unable to resolve the NoM episode, as illustrated by Example 6:

Example 6:
<JAP6> Ah... <Confirmation> Maybe in Japan black is death mean… (Linguistic. Attended. Unresolved) *Black has mean... uhmmm… black has mean…* bad means. <Self-correction>

The rest of the unresolved triggers were all related to problems concerning content, having found 11 in the corpus. In most cases, students attempted to solve NoM episodes as fast as they could, which made them leave some triggers unresolved if the negotiation was prolonged for a longer period of time than expected. In these cases, students do attend the triggers, but after some moves, they shift to a different topic.

Example 7:
<SPA2> Ah… <nods> Ok, so… Are you talking about an account on Twitter about future and makes predictions? 'Cause I know there's an account on Twitter and is posting tweets about thinks that the are <" sign> supposed to happen in the future, and they are all related to famous people. Are you talking about that account? (Content. Attended. Unresolved)
<JAP1 nods>
<JAP2 nod>
<SPA2> Were you talking about Twitter, the social network? <Reformulation>
<JAP1> Ah, <nods> yes, yes, yes.
<JAP3> Yeah, yeah.
<SPA2> Ok, so, are you talking… I know, there's an <finger> account who tweets about things that are supposed to happen in the future. About famous people like actors and singers, are you talking about that one? <Reformulation>
<JAP1> <looks up> Hm…
<SPA1> <unintelligible>
<SPA2> No? Ok. Ok.

Excepting linguistic and content-related issues, the rest of the triggers were resolved successfully. Apart from the limited number of these kinds of triggers in the corpus, there may be other reasons for this to occur, the principal one being that students may

have considered these kinds of issues impeded the successful flow of the conversation in a relevant manner. Considering that some of these issues, such as technical problems and overlapping, are more common in virtual conversation than in face-to-face interaction, probably students were very conscious of the presence of such issues and were prepared to solve them. Regarding technical problems specifically, students addressed these issues by carrying out various sound checks very patiently, which implies, as mentioned by Clavel-Arroitia (2019,109), that students may consider the solving of these triggers necessary for the completion of the task. A technical problem and the procedure that students carried out to solve it is illustrated in Example 8 hereunder:

Example 8:
<SPA4> I'm very sorry, I cannot hear.
<JAP4, JAP5, SPA3, and SPA4 laugh>
<SPA3> <smiling> I don't know <looking down to accommodate the wires of her earphones> what else to do! Whyy? Uhmm <looking around>
[…]
<SPA4> You can mute <like pressing a button> and then [unmute] <makes a circle with the finger> <Use of gesture>
<SPA3> [Yeah yeah,] I'm going to do that.
<SPA3> What about now? <rising eyebrowns> Uhm…
[…]
<SPA3> This is so weird! <laughs>
<JAP5> [Sometimes…]
<SPA4> [María you… they…]
<JAP5>Sometimes I can hear, hear <pointing at the screen> María [voice].
<SPA3>[Hm…] Sometimes? <Comprehension check>
<JAP5> Yes.
<SPA3 laughs>
<JAP5 smiles>
<SPA3> <looking at her left> Uhmm… <chuckles> <speaks louder> I'll try to speak louder.
<JAP5> Ok. <smiling> *<Confirmation>*
<SPA3> Ok?
<JAP5> Ok. <nods> <Confirmation>
<JAP4> Ok. <Confirmation>

Lastly, one of the main limitations of audiovisual CMC is related to overlapping, since it is common to find cases in which one of the students' audio is delayed due to connection issues. Even though overlapping episodes were not always an issue in these interactions, some communicative breakdowns took place due to interruptions between students. Nevertheless, it is necessary to bear in mind that interruptions also take place in face-to-face interaction, although to a smaller extent. As it was mentioned in section 2, telecollaboration has the potential to expose students to authentic communication models in institutionalised contexts. Consequently, students may have found it necessary to solve triggers of this nature and did so by apologising and letting the others speak:

Example 9:
<*SPA5*> *[Are you…] (Overlapping. Attended. Resolved)*
<*JAP6*> *[I want] to know… uhm? Sorry.*
<*SPA5*> I keep interrupting you, I'm so sorry. Keep going.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse three synchronous audiovisual telecollaborative interactions so as to assess the importance of NoM episodes, as well as define the main features of said items. Thus, the results obtained evidence that NoM episodes are crucial in these telecollaborative exchanges, since they represent more than half of the corpus totality. The contrast between the results presented in this paper and those obtained by Smith (2003, 45) evidence the relevance of media in said telecollaborative interactions. Indeed, the audiovisual nature of the exchanges analysed in this study had a crucial effect on the number of NoM episodes. Regarding the triggers found in the corpus, and similarly to Clavel-Arroitia (2019, 105), it should be noted that most of the linguistic issues were not attended by students, which emphasises the functional nature of language in telecollaborative interactions. Lastly, students were highly committed to solving their communicative breakdowns, as illustrated by the high presence of resolved triggers.

Nevertheless, some limitations can be found in this study. First of all, further details of interest could not be analysed due to

space constraints, not only in terms of obtained data, but also regarding the size of the corpus. Only 3 out of 11 interactions from the partnership were studied in this paper, since they were randomly chosen to represent the whole corpus, so an analysis of the complete partnership would provide even wider perspectives and a variety of results.

Apart from said limitations, this paper illustrates how NoM episodes represent a relevant aspect of interaction in telecollaborative experiences, since these tools are able to offer students with chances of interaction not very different from that of face-to-face conversation. Hence, the relevance of NoM episodes in both interactive research and pedagogical environments is evident, making it necessary to undertake additional studies within this field.

Besides, even though the majority of triggers were attended and resolved, there was a certain number of linguistic triggers that were not addressed by students. Therefore, it can be concluded that students in audiovisual telecollaborative experiences of these characteristics do not focus on linguistic correction. Consequently, further research is needed in order to find out if this is the same in other types of telecollaborative partnerships. Moreover, reinforcing the correction of such linguistic issues may enhance the already high potential of telecollaborative experiences and, thus, future studies could deal with that aspect.

Finally, and from a more general standpoint, NoM episodes in telecollaboration should continue to be explored due to the multiple affordances and opportunities that students are offered with. Exploring other exchanges could provide researchers and instructors with even more information, apart from a stronger guidance for a consolidated inclusion of these in institutionalised pedagogical contexts.

References

Atkinson, Maxwell & Heritage, John. 1984. *Structures of Social Action*. Cambridge: CUP.

Bañados, Emerita. 2006. "A Blended-learning Pedagogical Model for Teaching and Learning EFL Successfully Through an

Online Interactive Multimedia Environment". *CALICO Journal*, 23(3): 533–550.

Bou-Franch, Patricia. 2001. "Conversation in Foreign Language Instruction". *Language Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom.* Eds. Victoria Codina & Eva Alcón. Castellón: Publicacions de la Universitat Jaume I: 53–73.

Bower, Jack, & Kawaguchi, Saomi. 2011. "Negotiation of Meaning and Corrective Feedback in Japanese/English eTandem". *Language Learning & Technology*, 15 (1): 41–71.

Canto, Silvia, Jauregi, Kristi & van den Bergh, Huub. 2013. "Integrating cross-cultural interaction through video-communication and virtual worlds in foreign language teaching programs: Is there an added value?". *ReCALL*, 25(1): 105–121. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344012000274

Chapelle, Carol A. 2007. "Technology and Second Language Acquistion". *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 27: 98–114.

Chun, Dorothy M. 2011. "Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence through Online Exchanges". *CALICO Journal*, 28(2): 392–419.

Chun, Dorothy M. 2016. "The role of technology in SLA research". *Language Learning & Technology*, 20(2): 98–115.

Clavel-Arroitia, Begoña. 2019. "Analysis of Telecollaborative Exchanges among Secondary Education Students: Communication Strategies and Negotiation of Meaning". *Porta Linguarum,* 31: 97–116.

Clavel-Arroitia, Begoña, & Pennock-Speck, Barry. 2015a. "Analysis of Teacher Roles in Telecollaboration in the Context of a European Funded Project (TILA Project)". *English and American Studies in Spain: New Developments and Trends*. Eds. Alberto Lázaro & María Dolores Porto. Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá de Henares: 189–196.

Clavel-Arroitia, Begoña. & Pennock-Speck, Barry. 2015b. "Telecollaboration in a secondary school context: Negotiation of meaning in English as a lingua franca/Spanish

tandem interactions". *@tic. Revista d'innovació educativa,* 15: 74–81.

Ellis, Rod. 1999. *Learning a second language through interaction.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Freeman, Melissa, & Hall, Jori N. 2012. "The Complexity of Practice: Participant Observation and Values Engagement in a Responsive Evaluation of a Professional Development School Partnership". *American Journal of Evaluation*, 33(4): 483–495. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214012443728

Graham, Charles R. 2006. "Blended Learning Systems – Definition, Current Trends, and Future Directions". *The handbook of blended learning. Global perspectives, local designs.* Eds. Curtis J. Bonk & Charles R. Graham. San Francisco: Pfeiffer: 3–21.

Gumperz, John J. & Berenz, Norine (1993). "Transcribing conversational exchanges". *Talking Data: Transcription and Coding in Discourse Research*. Eds. Jane A. Edwards and Martin D. Lampert. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum: 91–121.

Guth, Sarah, & Helm, Francesca. 2012. "Developing multiliteracies in ELT through telecollaboration". *ELT Journal*, 66 (1): 42–51.

Hoffstaedter, Petra, & Kohn, Kurt. 2015. "Flipping intercultural communication practice: opportunities and challenges for the foreign language classroom". *ANTWERP CALL*: 1–6.

Hoffstaedter, Petra, & Kohn, Kurt. n.d. "Tandem and pedagogical lingua franca in intercultural telecollaboration". Accessed November 25, 2021. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jztj_oVcJ9LMxmUWu78eAg41O-VYMHkI/view

Hrastinski, Stefan, & Keller, Christina. 2007. "Computer-mediated communication in education: A review of recent research". *Educational Media International*, 44(1): 61–77.

Jauregi, Kristi. 2015. "Integrating telecollaboration for intercultural language acquisition at secondary education: lessons learned". *Critical CALL–Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy.* Eds. Francesca Helm, Linda Bradley, Marta Guarda, & Sylvie Thouësny.

Dublin: Research-publishing.net: 268–273. http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2015.000344

Krashen, Stephen. 1992. *Fundamentals of language education.* Laredo Publishing Co., California.

Langford, David. 1994. *Analysing Talk*. London: MacMillan.

Lee, Lina. 2001. "Online interaction: negotiation of meaning and strategies used among learners of Spanish". *ReCALL*, 13(2): 232–244.

Lee, Lina. 2006. "A study of native and nonnative speakers' feedback and responses in Spanish-American networked collaborative interaction". *Internet-Mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education*. Eds. Julie Belz & Stephen Thorne. Boston: Thomson Heinle: 147–176.

Loewen, Shawn. & Sato, Masatoshi. 2018. "Interaction and instructed second language acquisition". *Language Teaching*, 51(3): 285–329.

Long, Michael H. 1983. "Native Speaker/non-native Speaker Conversation and the Negotiation of Comprehensible Input". *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2): 126–141.

O'Dowd, Robert. 2003. "Understanding the 'Other Side': Intercultural Learning in a Spanish-English E-mail Exchange", *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2): 118–144.

O'Dowd, Robert. 2007a. *Online intercultural exchange: an introduction for foreign language teachers*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

O'Dowd, Robert. 2007b, "Evaluating the Outcomes of Online Intercultural Exchange". *ELT Journal* 4(2): 144–152.

Pennock-Speck, Barry, & Clavel-Arroitia, Begoña. 2018. "Teachers' perspectives on telecollaboration in secondary school foreign language education". *LEA – Lingue e letterature d'Occidente*, 7: 483–509.

Pérez-Cañado, María Luisa. 2010. "Using virtual learning environments and computer-mediated communication to enhance the lexical competence of pre-service English teachers: A quantitative and qualitative study". *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23(2): 129–150.

Schenker, Theresa. 2012. "Intercultural Competence and Cultural Learning through Telecollaboration". *CALICO Journal*, 29(3): 449-470.

Smith, Bryan. 2003. "Computer-mediated negotiated interaction: An expanded model". *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(1): 38–57.

Smith, Bryan. 2005. "The relationship between negotiated interaction, learner uptake, and lexical acquisition in task-based computer-mediated communication". *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(1): 33–58.

Swain, Merrill. 1985. "Communicative Competence: Some roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development". *Input in second language acquisition*. Eds. Susan M. Gass & Carolyn Madden. Rowley, MA: Newbury House: 235–253.

Thorne, Kaye. 2003. *Blended Learning: How to Integrate Online & Traditional Learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Todd, D. Jick. 1979. "Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action". *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24 (4): 602-611.

Varonis, Evangeline M. & Gass, Susan M. 1985. "Non-native/Non-native Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning". *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1).

Vinagre, Margarita. 2007. "Integrating Tandem Learning in Higher Education". *Online Intercultural Exchange*. Ed. Robert O'Dowd. Bristol: Multilingual: 240–249. Matters.https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847690104-014

Vinagre, Margarita. n.d. "VELCOME: Virtual exchange for learning and competence development in EMI classrooms". Accessed November 16, 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/project/VELCOME-VIRTUAL-EXCHANGE-FOR-LEARNING-AND-COMPETENCE-DEVELOPMENT-IN-EMI-CLASSROOMS

Received: December 13, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 31, 2022

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 81-102.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

LANGUAGE AND PERFORMATIVITY: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER AND RACIAL IDENTITIES IN T. KINGFISHER'S *SWORDHEART*

Beatriz Hermida Ramos
Universidad de Salamanca

Under her pseudonym T. Kingfisher, fantasy writer Ursula Vernon has published several novels and short story collections in which notions of belonging, identity and hegemonic power are both explored and openly challenged. In fact, her Hugo and Nebula award winning works have been praised not only for their ability to examine such topics through a lighthearted tone, but also because of their portrayal of marginalized social identities.

In particular, this research paper focuses on one of her later novels, *Swordheart* (2018), and its discursive exploration of gender and race; arguing that the narrative treatment of the two main characters, Halla and Sarkis, allows for an interpretation of language as a form of resistance against vertical systems of violence—particularly, the patriarchy and white supremacy.

Specifically, this paper relies on Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas of gender performativity and Meyerhoff's (2014) notions of discursive stereotyping to examine how Halla's linguistic performance of a working class and domestic-bound femininity can be understood as a deliberate weaponization of stereotypical and essentialist womanhood. Moreover, Kingfisher's treatment of

racialized identities is also seen as an element of academic interest. Drawing from Coates's (2015) writings of violence and the Black body, this article will explore the ways in which the narrative description of Sarkis' body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities.

Keywords: gender; race; performativity; CDA; Swordheart

1. Introduction

In recent years, science fiction and fantastical narratives have risen in popularity, partially due to the creation of specialized editorial houses, and the proliferation of new forms of consuming and sharing speculative narratives through technology. However, speculative stories have not only gained economic and commercial popularity, but they have also become an object of academic attention. In particular, science fiction and speculative fiction scholars have closely examined the ways in which these stories serve to question and (re)imagine our current realities (Kennon 2011, Le Guin 2020), as well as alternative futures.

While science fiction, fantasy and speculative narratives have been analyzed and studied from slightly different lenses—here we might be reminded of Darko Suvin's emphasis on the 'cognitive estrangement' of science fiction (1979), for instance, or Robles' (2021, 22) concern with the integration of supernatural elements in fantasy narratives—this paper will be discussing the three genres and their narrative possibilities together. This paper does not wish to portray all forms of speculative storytelling as monolithic or interchangeable, but rather, it stems from a desire to highlight how their shared ability to offer new possibilities of being, belonging, and narrating makes the claims in this article applicable to the three genres—thus why it draws from fantasy, speculative fiction and science fiction scholars.

In particular, this research paper is interested in exploring the narrative affordances offered by speculative storytelling in regards to othered communities, arguing that the destabilization of the

normal that takes place in these forms of fiction allows for a discursive reimagination of marginalized identities. In the last decades, science fiction authors and scholars have been concerned with the ways in which gender (Russ 1995, Robles 2021), sexuality (Gay 2008) and class (Bould and Miéville 2009), among other social variables, can be challenged and questioned through these narratives—as well as how issues of identity and power seem to lay at the very core of fantasy, speculative and science fiction stories.

Drawing from this ecology of knowledge, we will be paying particular attention to the work of an author that has been neglected by academia, despite exploring issues of power and belonging through fantasy narratives— that is, Ursula Vernon. Under her pseudonym T. Kingfisher, fantasy writer Ursula Vernon has published several novels and short story collections in which belonging, identity and the limits of the possible are both explored and openly challenged. In fact, her Hugo and Nebula award winning works have been praised not only for their ability to examine such topics through a dark yet lighthearted tone, but also because of their portrayal of marginalized social identities. This research paper focuses on one of her later novels, *Swordheart* (2018), and its discursive exploration of gendered and racial identities. Specifically, it argues that the narrative treatment of the two main characters, Halla and Sarkis, depicts language as a survival strategy and a form of resistance against hegemonic violence—as well as against vertical and violent notions of economic class.

The 2018 novel is centered around Halla, a housekeeper who inherits both a small fortune and a magical sword from an old relative. This medieval inspired fantasy story also follows the character of Sarkis—the immortal guardian of the sword—and their companions in their quest to both claim Halla's inheritance and to avoid the deadly danger of the fantasy creatures they encounter—as well as the threat posed by Halla's ill-intended relatives.

Since the intersection of gender, identity and power is central to this article, we will be drawing from Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas of gender performativity and Meyerhoff's (2014) notions of discursive stereotyping. Again, we will pay special attention to how Halla's linguistic performance of a working class and domestic-

bound femininity can be seen as a deliberate weaponization of the conceptions of womanhood that harm her and position her as a subaltern other—all while taking into account that this discursive practice is one of the few ways Halla is able to exercise active agency. Moreover, Kingfisher's treatment of racialized identities is also an element of academic interest. Drawing from Coates's (2015) writings of violence and the Black body, this article will argue that that the narrative description of Sarkis' body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities—which in turn illustrates the transformative and political potential of language.

This article is divided in five sections, first of all the introduction at hand, then a theoretical background in which the academic theories and authors this paper draws from are expanded upon. Thirdly, there is a methodology section in which the corpus is contextualized, and the methodological approach and tools are described in detail. Then, we may find an analysis and discussion section, consisting of an examination of both Halla's and Sarkis' discursive representations in the novel, and the specific ways in which they illustrate the transformative potential of science fiction in regards to subaltern and othered identities. Lastly, we have a conclusion that includes an overview of the paper and its main claims, the issues discussed during the analysis and the limitations and possibilities of expansion of this research.

2. Theoretical Background

This section explores the different academic fields this article draws upon, as well as the ways in which they interact with one another in their understandings of identity, power and discourse.

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

This research paper relies on Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) as its main theoretical and methodological tool, since this discipline is mainly concerned with the relationship between language, ideology and social power. While there is not a

fully unified or shared definition of CDA, there are some core ideas shared by all of its branches. For instance, we might mention the understanding of discourse as social practice—that is, the notion that all linguistic productions cannot be divorced from their social dimension, role and meaning, including the cultural and economic context they are (re)produced in—and the notion of discourse as having the potential for challenging and shaping systems of power and oppression (see Van Dijk 2009). In other words, this research paper works under the assumption that "discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change" (Fairclough 2001, 27), and thus sees the linguistic and the social as irremediably linked.

This perception of language being inherently connected to power and society is also accompanied by a political stance against hegemonic and systemic violence. CDA, as a discipline, tends to reject the pretense of academic objectivity, and instead demands a certain critical positionality that is in alignment with radical liberatory movements. Again, the position of this article regarding patriarchal and racial violence does not necessarily mean that it is irremediably biased, but rather that, as every piece of research is, it comes from a certain subjectivity that is ideologically and culturally situated—here I want to allude to Donna Haraway's' situated knowledge (2004) and Sandra Harding's 'strong objectivity' (1993). These notions are essential for understanding CDA as a useful approach for analyzing the narratives that surround marginalized communities, specially since issues lay at the core of CDA's view of discourse itself.

Even though I have mentioned Van Dijk before, this research paper will be mainly following Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, as it is directly concerned with how "text are often sites of social struggle in that they manifest traces of differing ideological fights for dominance and hegemony" (2009). Moreover, it will also follow Fairclough's Dialectical-Relational Approach, as

it prioritizes the exploration of resistance and identity (Fairclough 2010)[1].

In addition, this research paper also draws from Michelle Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth FCDA), which is interested in highlighting the prevalent role of cisnormative and patriarchal violence in relation to hegemonic violence and the status quo. Not only that, but FCDA also wishes to pose the question of how gender-based stereotypes, violence and dominance are "discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts" (Lazar 2014, 182) — which requires centering gender, sexuality and the body in our interrogations of hegemonic violence.

2.2. Gender Studies

This research paper also relies on feminist studies that favor social constructionist and poststructuralist approaches to gender—as opposed to gender essentialist theories. That is, this article understands gender as a socially constructed notion that is not situated in nor can be reduced to a male-female binary, but is, instead, a spectrum that includes multiple identities that are culture specific (Butler, 1990, 2004; Serano 2020). We are also particularly concerned with the performative and linguistic elements of gender, always bearing in mind that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2016). Thus, by viewing gender performativity not as a mere discursive repetition, but as a form of realizing and

[1]While I am drawing from these two particular branches of CDA, I am not necessarily of the opinion that there is a clear cut and unmovable distinction between CDA's methodological approaches. Instead, this article believes that each author offers a different set of theoretical tools to examine the relationship between the social, the political and the linguistic, and that there is an inevitable (and probably necessary) overlap between branches.

rendering visible one's gender and gendered identity, we further and strengthen the connection between language and gender.

This is essential to understand the relationship between discourse and identity, and how the former can be used to "consider and clarify the force of the socially ascribed nature of gender: the assumptions and expectations of (often binary) ascribed social roles against which any performance of gender is constructed, accommodated or resisted" (Bergvall 1999, 282)—as well how essentialist and binary understandings of gender are (re)produced through hegemonic narratives.

Similarly to (F)CDA, feminist and gender studies require a certain political compromise against cisheteropatriarchal ideals that not only position (white, non-disabled and middle class) cisheterosexual male lives at the center of society, but also present cisnormativity, misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality (see Rich 1980) as seemly normal and natural states of the world—instead of being seen as vertical systems of oppression that have been actively constructed to relegate women, queer and non-binary people to the margins. Similarly, this article understands gender-based violence as inherently connected with other vertical systems of dominance, such capitalism, ableism and white supremacy—thus seeing gender as undivorceable from notions of class or race, among others

Here it is quite necessary to note that, while this research paper is analyzing gender and race in two separate subsections, it still advocates for an intersectional approach and rejects the possibility of understanding or even conceptualizing gender and raceless or race as genderless, reinforcing the idea of the two notions coexisting together in the previously mentioned forms of social, economic and political dominance (see Crenshaw 1989, Carruthers 2019).

Again, this article is particularly interested in the ways in which gender is performed and realized discursively, as language is seen as offering possibilities of constructing identities that are temporally, geographically and culturally specific (see Cameron 1995). Another key point of interest here is that of language stereotyping in relation to gender—that is, how specific gendered groups (in the case of this article, women and people who are

socially read as such) are expected to talk and to perform gender through language, as well as how the linguistic traits that have been historically associated with these groups are devalued precisely due to their connection with womanhood and femininity. To do so, we will be drawing form Meyerhoff's work on linguistic stereotyping (2014) and third wave sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012), rather than focusing on earlier sociolinguistic works that dealt with semi-rigid ideas of 'women's talk'.

2.3. Race and Language

As it has already been anticipated in the introduction, one of the main aims of this research paper is to explore the discursive representation of race in the context of Sarkis' character. To do so, this article will be exploring the role of discourse in the production of racial identities (see Solórzano and Yosso 2002), instead of assuming that race can be seen as a biological absolute. This approach draws from critical race theory (Davis 1983, Delgado and Stefancic 2001) and postcolonial studies (Harrison 2003, Langer 2011), and requires paying particular attention to (neo)colonial and imperial efforts to construct certain bodies as racialized—which then serves to position certain racial and ethnic identities as uncivilized while elevating the idea of whiteness itself (see Balibar 1994). In addition, we are also working with an understanding of whiteness that sees it as dependent on this epistemological distinction, as well as rooted in a colonial past that sees racialized bodies as commodities.

As it has been already mentioned, the intersection of race, power and discourse lays at the very core of CDA, since a significant number of CDA's foundational texts deal with these notions—such as Van Dijk's work on the linguistic realization of the idea of race and how racist and hegemonic discourses are (re)produced, distributed and reinforced through language and the press (1991).

Finally, we may also comment on how science fiction, fantasy and speculative narratives have historically been concerned with destabilizing and questioning the idea of the alien other, the racial other and that of race itself—bringing at the forefront of these stories

what it means to belong and how race and ethnicity are linked to ideas of normality. Not only that, but science fiction and speculative scholars have also examined the role of literature and storytelling in reinforcing and naturalizing said false normality (see Haslam 2015). Thus, speculative stories, and *Swordheart* in particular, become a narrative space that allows for questioning and challenging how the racialized body is discursively constructed, and the role of imperial and neocolonial violence and logic in this very construction.

3. Methodology

This article is a case study of the fantasy novel *Swordheart* (2018), written by T. Kingfisher and published by Argyll Productions, a small American editorial house that focuses on 'science fiction from the margins' (2021). The story is set in a medieval not-descriptive town and follows Halla, a housekeeper that has unexpectedly inherited a small fortune—as well as an enchanted sword in which a mercenary has been imprisoned for centuries, forced to serve the yielder of the sword. The pair, accompanied by the characters of Brindle, a gnole[2], and Zale, a non-binary priest, attempts to survive the dangers they find in their quest to help Halla legitimize her inheritance and gain economic freedom—all while the narrative seems to criticize how the economic and legal system of their world condemns women, non-binary people and working-class communities to a life of isolation and domestic servitude.

While the novel maintains a lighthearted tone all throughout, it focuses on how class, gender and race intersect and interact with one another, as well focusing on the possibilities offered by language in resisting vertical and multiaxial structures of power and rendering them visible. Thus, the methodological choice of conducting a case study instead of relying on a quantitative approach is rooted not only in the belief that issues of discourse and identity can be found at the core of the novel, but also due to the text being

[2]A type of fantastical creature that exists in the world of *Swordheart*.

seen as exemplifying the emancipatory and subversive potential of fantasy narratives.

In addition, and as already anticipated, this research paper will be relying upon (F)CDA as a methodological approach. We are going to be looking at issues of lexical choice, nomination and predicational strategies and (self) representation (Wodak and Meyer 2015), and we will be focusing on specific segments of the novel where the use of these discursive strategies to negotiate a certain gendered or racialized identity is more obvious—rather than focusing on specific and isolated linguistic constructions.

However, before moving onto the analysis, we must note that CDA has traditionally been used to dissect what is normally referred to as 'naturally occurring examples of language', which is code for non-literary language. Yet, if we rely on Critical Stylistics, which applies a more radical and social approach to traditional stylistics—if it is possible to even talk about 'traditional' stylistics—we can justify using CDA methodology on fictional texts since it generally views literature as discourse (Fowler 1981, 1996) and therefore as a legitimate object of study in regards to CDA.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Halla: Gender, Language and Performativity

As it can be inferred from the plot described in the previous section, a substantial part of the novel is concerned with highlighting the systems of dominance that position Halla as a subaltern other with limited autonomy and influence. From the beginning of the story, she is presented as a vulnerable, middle-aged woman; someone whose gender identity, economic dependency and working-class status render her as an object unable to enact active agency.

While this stereotyping of Halla as a powerless woman is related to her living in a rural area, her being a house-keeper and to

her main occupation being reproductive and domestic work[3], part of her initial characterization as 'ignorant' and 'incapable' is her bubbly way of speaking and her constant asking questions—that is, her idiolect. These linguistic characteristics are seen as intrinsically connected with her gender identity in the yes of other characters, such as Sarkis. To him, these discursive practices seem to infer a certain 'life' inexperience, lack of knowledge and even, vapidness—which, again, brings back the notion of gendered knowledge and the question of whose experiences and occupations are seen as valuable.

Yet again, we must remember that the character of Halla has very limited resources and possibilities of resisting a cisheteropatriarchal system that positions her at the margins; a system is built, reproduced and maintained on the grounds of that same differentiation. One of the elements she can take cover in and use to gain a certain level of freedom is her being a widow, which provides her with some level of 'respectability' and allows for her to postpone the prospect of a new marriage on grounds of religious morality—here we have the policing of women' sexuality, desire and autonomy, as well as a reminder of the impossibility of a sexual liberation in a context that commodifies subaltern lives, bodies and desires. Thus, even if Halla's position as a widow provides her with a certain social leverage and allows for her not to remarry immediately, she is still trapped in the institution of the family due to the economic and patriarchal system.

The other way Halla is able to protect herself is by linguistically enacting a hyperfeminine and easily dismissible persona—which is directly connected with her initial presentation and the discursive patterns and behaviors that are generally attributed to women in mainstream discourse. This would include the notion of women dominating conversations, 'overspeaking' or

[3]The novel makes a point of denouncing that reproductive labor and care work are so devalued because of their association with femininity and womanhood in a patriarchal system, and portrays Halla's 'domestic' skills and knowledge as essential to the group's survival.

over explaining themselves, and focusing on domestic and private interests in terms of topic choice (Meyerhoofer 2014).

Again, we are working with the understanding of gender being a fluid social construct, and that gendered and sexual identities can be and are enacted, negotiated and (re)defined through linguistic practices (Queen 2014)—which implies the rejection of the essentialist and outdated notion of women inherently talking and producing language a certain way. Rather, what this research article is concerned with is the linguistic expectations those that are read as women face, and how those preconceived notions limit and impact one's self-presentation and ability to perform gender altogether.

Nevertheless, while the discursive enacting of social identities tends to be viewed as a generally subconscious (or rather, non-deliberate) use of language, it is also worth mentioning that marginalized communities and individuals learn to perform a more palatable and less 'threatening' version of their own identities in order to survive and to navigate hostile spaces. Therefore, the linguistic strategies of self-definition that are available or feasible in a given space are directly influenced by the cultural and social context, especially in situations in which the open portrayal of one's non-normative identity can be dangerous.

This research paper argues that Halla is deliberately drawing from the sociolinguistic stereotypes that code her as inherently ignorant in order to perform a hegemonic and domestic femininity. By relying on the "repetition of hegemonic forms which fail to repeat loyally" (Butler 2016, 124), Halla is able to weaponize linguistic stereotypes of 'female ignorance' and protect herself from patriarchal violence. These linguistic choices—what she calls "her protective shell of foolishness" (354)—are not understood as a caricature of working class and rural women, but as a resistance strategy against hegemonic ideas and power structures that draws from the potential of discourse to shape social identities and the status quo itself—an idea that is, again, central to (F)CDA and reinforces the connections between the corpus and the methodology.

In the quotation below we can see how other characters are aware of the fact that Halla's linguistic choices are used as a survival strategy, connecting them with Halla's inability to obtain any formal

education or cultural capital in a patriarchal society. Moreover, we can see once again how her performance of gender is directly linked with the issue of language and power—as well as being directly determined by the fantastic allowances of the novel.

> Which is not to say that Halla does not sometimes ask questions to throw people off. But she is, I think, like many children born in poverty. Intelligent…curious…but never given beyond the most basic education. In boys, that sort of thing is valued, in girls…" Zale shook their head. "Had she come to the attention of the Rat, we might have made a scholar of her. As it is, *she has learned to be quiet and agreeable and to appear quite stupid when it is convenient*. But the curiosity still comes through. (166, my emphasis)

Here we can see how the stereotyping of women as dominating conversations and 'overspeaking' is brought up again, yet it is now linked with Halla's working class status, connecting her lack of cultural and economic capital with her being a working class woman that lives in an isolated rural community—communities that have been traditionally characterized as and assumed to be ignorant. Not only that, but the line "to appear quite stupid when it is convenient" appears to reinforce the fact that Halla is aware of the social and linguistic stereotypes she is subjected to, and thus decides to deliberately weaponize them in an act of discursive agency.

The second extract this paper wishes to examine is that of Halla herself commenting on how her linguistic production and her idiolect are directly determined by her social status and her lack of perceived authority. Specifically, she establishes that she wishes she was able to adopt a more direct and perhaps even hostile linguistic persona, instead of needing to recur to linguistic stereotyping—in this case, she mentions over explaining and using lexical items from the domestic realm. Specifically, she compares herself to the character of Zale, who is able to use their positioning as a respectable priest to reject hostile linguistic environments.

> Halla rather admired the priest's flat refusal to answer the question. S*he'd be burying the man in information, herself, with every relative she had in every town along the way, including some made up on the spot*. Still, Zale had a certain authority and c*ould get away with defiance* (165, my emphasis)

Albeit the character of Zale is not an element of study in this research paper, their identity as a non-binary priest in an environment that elevates and respects religious scholars serves to reinforce the importance of intersectionality (in this case that of class and gender) when discussing linguistic agency. Opposite to Halla, for whom class reinforces the social disdain she experiences as a woman, Zale's identity is somewhat protected, overlooked or left unquestioned by their social affordances as a member of a powerful group, allowing them to refuse a tamer or safer discursive presentation. Again, other characters are aware of this difference and openly comment on Halla's idiolect and the fact that "[s]he's found a way to weaponize ignorance" (348).

Our third example is that of an exchange between Halla and a group of priests that attempt to detain and capture the main characters on grounds of immorality and religious corruption. Outnumbered and with no opportunity to resist by physical force, Halla resorts to portraying a certain hegemonic femininity to appear unthreatening—once again weaponizing the discursive expectations that have been placed upon her.

> "Can you believe it?" Halla demanded. "If they'd just asked for biscuits, I would have given them some! It's not like they stay fluffy past the second day! You have to eat them up, or they get hard as rocks. Well, you know."
>
> Judging by the look on the Motherhood captain's face, he did not know.
>
> "I don't—" he started to say, but Halla had the bit between her teeth now.
>
> "And it was my grandmother's recipe! My grandmother's! They stole my grandmother's biscuits, can you imagine? What kind of depraved mind steals a woman's extra biscuits?
>
> Truly shocking," murmured Zale, casting a long-suffering look at the Motherhood priests.
>
> "No, no," said Halla, waving her hand. "No, I know. You've got bigger things to worry about than bandits stealing a respectable widow's baked goods. It's all terrible, the way the rule of law has gone, that's all. I hope you find your missing men. If you do, bring them by, and I'll make you all biscuits."

> There was a long, teetering moment when Halla thought it might work. She'd stonewalled better men than the Motherhood captain. Such men hated to look foolish, and if you could appear so absurd that bothering you made them look equally absurd… (333)

When looking at the lexical choice of this extract, we may comment on how Halla seems to deliberately thematize the private sphere with references to family members (line 6) and domestic work ('biscuits'), alluding to a certain traditional and non-threatening femininity that aligns with expectations of women being complacent and non-dangerous. This notion, which is again deemed a deliberate linguistic choice with that of "but Halla already had the bits between her teeth" (line 5), is also accompanied by certain nomination and self-definition strategies in which Halla focuses on gender as a bases for group categorization and identity, putting womanhood at the forefront of the discourse with the repetition of terms such as 'woman' in line 7 and 'a respectable widow' in line 10.

This discursive weaponizing of traditional femininity being associated with ignorance is also furthered by certain thematizations and predicational strategies by which Halla hedges and diminishes her own importance, describing herself as an inconvenience (line 9)—a characterization that is enhanced and reinforced by Zale's gestures (line 8)—and her pretending to respect authority figures and police forces. Finally, these strategies also rely on the aforementioned forms of linguistic stereotyping women and femme presenting people face, such as that of 'overexplaining' and dominating conversations and constant use of rhetorical questions.

Finally, it is also crucial to note that Halla's performance also relies on the relatively unconscious complicity of hegemonic masculinity; that is, she assumes the priests will not engage in conversation with her for fear of being associated with her hyperfeminine discourse ("such men hated to look foolish" in line 14). This is, again, a way of construing a certain gendered, in this case masculine, identity, one that reacts to and positions itself as opposite to and distant from Halla's womanhood.

However, before moving onto the next subsection, I want to very briefly comment on the role of race in Halla's linguistic

performance and how her whiteness furthers her being perceived as pure, unassuming and non-threatening. While this research paper has explored and focused upon how Halla uses language to protect herself due to her limited social and economical capital, there is a historical tradition of white femininity and politics of respectability being deliberately weaponized to hurt queer and racialized communities, as exemplified in Hamad's 2020 and Jones-Rogers 2019 work. Therefore, even if this article believes Halla's discourse to be an act of linguistic agency and self-determination, it is necessary to note that it is rooted in racial violence and the hypervigilance of non-white communities.

4.2. Sarkis, Violence and the Black Body

This second part of the analysis and discussion section is concerned with the linguistic representations of non-white bodies and the subversive potentiality of discourse in the particular fantastical context of T. Kingfisher's *Swordheart* (2018). Again, we are working with the idea of race being a social constructed identity that is deeply intertwined with systems of hegemonic violence and white supremacy that are prevalent in the West.

Specifically, we will be examining the portrayal of the character of Sarkis, the love interest of Halla that has been imprisoned in a magical sword. Coded as racialized —he can be read as a Black man—, Sarkis' journey follows his inability to free himself from his servitude duty to the sword in the present day, and goes back in time to contextualize the numerous forms of violence and mistreat that he has endured over decades as an enslaved man. However, we must note that, since Halla's narrative is prioritized in the novel as she is the main protagonist, this subsection will be slightly shorter than the previous one.

What is most salient about the linguistic portrayal of Sarkis is his lack of linguistic agency—particularly when compared to that of Halla. Rather than having his past discussed by dialogue, with his own words, Sarkis' story and experiences of violence are told through references to his body and the marks of pain, scars and wounds that have been inflicted upon him. His body is presented as

a site of historical struggle, a visible reminder of the effects (neo)colonial and imperial have upon racialized communities.

To explore the ways in which Sarkis' experiences of violence are discussed, we will examine several passages in the novel in which the notion of Sarkis' body as a site of historical trauma (see Bakare-Yusuf 1999 and Moore 2009) is thematized through the use of lexical choice and predication strategies:

1) There were scars there, too, cutting starkly across the lines of ink. A stag with curling horns ran across his left bicep, its throat sliced open with silver. (57)
2) "I fear I will go on and on and on, until there is nothing left of me but silver scars and I have forgotten what it is like to be a man instead of a blade." (93)
3) "A spear like that, in the proper hands, could be far more lethal than a sword, as Sarkis happened to know. One of the lower scars in the mass scribbled on his chest had been from the point of a spear like that" (209)
4) "[…] you had nothing but secrets and failure and a body wracked with silver scars." (231)

One of the patterns we may comment on is the repetition of the term 'scars', and the allusions and explicit discussions of physical violence, somethings enacted by Sarkis but more often experienced by him ("cutting starkly across the lines of ink" in example 1 and "one of the lower scars in the mass scribbled on his chest had been from the point of a spear like that" in example 3"). This article am also particularly interested in the implications of the line "I have forgotten what it is like to be a man instead of a blade" in the second extract, as it seems to position discussions of the instrumentalization and weaponization of Black bodies at the forefront of the narrative (see hooks 1984), as well as hinting at the potentiality of discourse in denouncing the dehumanization of non-white communities.

I also want to briefly mention how the aforementioned examples have taken place in the span of many centuries, as Sarkis was cursed with immortality the moment he was imprisoned into the sword. The constant and repeated nature of this violence seems then to allude to the legacy of white supremacy, as well as white supremacy itself, being still present — as well the fact that vertical

forms of violence that are drawn upon and maintained by racialized bodies and labor.

There is a final extract from the novel this paper wishes to comment on, which is that of "one of my wielders liked to cut out my tongue" (168). It is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of cruelty in the book, both because of the implied repetition of the mutilation (Sarkis previously established that his wounds heal naturally due to the curse) and because of the casual tone in which it is said, drawing attention to the normalization of racial cruelty. This specific act of mutilation, which is directly connected with language and speech control, is also reminiscent of slavery practices of the Global North, as well as being reminiscent of Coates' idea of the "ability to break the [Black]bodies" as a "mark of civilization" (2015, 104), and the use of violence to elevating racist ideas of white civility.

Again, there is an abundance of violent lexicon that results in Sarkis being defined through his body, and the notion of the body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities. Not only that, but when looking at lexical choice and predication strategies that his self-definition comes from the proofs of his survival, rather than from an opportunity to exercise discursive agency. Moreover, this portrayal does not challenge structural forms of violence like Halla's does, but rather, relies on language to expose them. Again, we come back not only to the subversive potential of fantasy narratives in offering textual spaces where the intersections of language, violence and identity can be explored, but also to the role of racial identity in allowing for linguistic agency.

5. Conclusion

In short, this research paper has been concerned with the transformative potential of fantastical narratives and their ability to challenge and render visible hegemonic forms of violence. We have paid attention to the ways in which speculative fiction offers narrative spaces to discuss subaltern identities, working with the

idea that these genres are inherently connected to the margins. To do so, we have followed (F)CDA understandings of discourse as a social practice that is embedded in social forms of domination, and we have explored the potential of (F)CDA in studying the connections between power, language and identity, focusing specifically on gendered and racial identities.

Following a social constructionist approach to gender and race, we have examined Halla's use of discourse and her weaponization of femininity as well as Sarkis' denouncement of racial violence as examples of subversive uses of language—while still exploring how the existence of vertical structures of power conditions the possibilities of linguistic agency. We have paid close attention to the ways in which class and rurality influences the perception of gender, and have analyzed the nomination, predication and self-definition strategies used by Halla to enact a traditionally feminine persona and protect herself in hostile environments. Moreover, we also examined issues of lexical choices and nomination strategies in order to understand how the racial body is presented as a site of struggle—a testimony of violence, almost—in Kingfisher's novel.

All in all, this research paper is limited in its scope and its corpora, as it only focuses on the linguistic realization of two social variables—gender and race — in a specific novel. Hopefully, this research can be expanded by either focusing on the role of class, ability… in the specific context of *Swordheart,* or perhaps it can be used as a starting point to explore commonalities in reference to language and identity in Kingfisher's work. I can only hope that, despite these limitations, this article has enriched the critical explorations of language and identity, and has furthered, if only slightly, the realm of speculative and fantastical studies.

References

Argyll Productions, 2021. *Argyll Productions*. Web <https://argyllproductions.com/>. [Acessed on November 3rd, 2021].

Bakare-Yusuf , Bibi. 1999. "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror." In *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, Eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 311-323. New York: Routledge.

Balibar, E. 1994. *Masses, Classes, Ideas*. London: Routledge.

Bervall, Victoria. «Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Language and Gender.» *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 273-293.

Bould, Mark, and China Miéville. 2009. *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction.* Connecticut: Pluto Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble.* London: Routledge.

—. 2004. *Undoing Gender.* London: Routledge.

—. 2016. *Bodies that Matter*. London: Routledge.

Cameron, Deborah. 1995. "Rethinking Language and Gender Studies: Some Issues for the 1990s". In *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Ed. Sara Mills, 31-44. London: Longman.

Carruthers, Charlene. A. 2019. *Sin Concesiones: Preceptos Negros, Queer y Feministas para Movimientos Radicales*. Bilbao: Consonni.

Coates, Ta-Nehesi. 2015. *Between the World and Me.* Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics". *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1:8, 139-167.

Davis, Angela.Y. 1983. *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Vintage.

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. 2001. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction.* New York: New York University Press.

Eckert, Penelope. 2012. "Three Waves of Variation." *The Annual Review of Antrophology* 41:1, 87-100.

Fairclough, Norman. 2001. *Language and Power: 2nd Edition.* London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

—. 2010. *Critical Discourse Analysis :The Critical Study of Language.* London: Longman.

Fowler, Roger. 1981. *Literature as Social Discourse.* Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Fowler, Roger. 1996. "Studying Literature as Language." In *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present*, Ed. Jean J. Weber, 196-205. London: Arnorld.

Gay, Wendy. 2008. *Queer Universes, Sexualities and Science Fiction.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Hamad, Ruby. 2020. *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color.* New York: Trapeze.

Haraway, D. 2004. *The Haraway Reader*. London: Routledge.

Harding, Sandra. 1983. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is Strong Objectivity?" *Feminist Epistemologies*, 49-82.

Harrison, Nicholas. 2003. *Postcolonial Criticism.* London: Polity.

Haslam, Jason. 2015. *Gender, Race and American Science Fiction: Reflections on Fantastic Identities.* New York and London: Taylor & Francis.

hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.* New York: Routledge.

Jones-Rogers, Stephanie E. 2019. *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* . Yale: Yale University Press.

Kennon, Patricia. 2011. "Contemplating Otherness: Imagining the Future in Speculative Fiction". In *Irish Children's Literature and Culture: New Perspectives on Contemporary Writing*. Eds. Valerie Coghlan and Keith O'Sullivan, 145-156. London: Routledge.

Kingfisher, T. 2008. *Swordheart.* Dallas: Argyll Productions.

Langer, Jessica. 2011. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Lazar, Michelle. 2014. "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Relevance for Current Gender Research." In *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Second Edition*, Eds. Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff and Janet Holmes, 180-201. London: Blackwell.

Le Guin, Ursula. 2020. K. *El Idioma de la Noche: Ensayos Sobre Fantasía y Ciencia Ficción.* Madrid: Gigamesh.

Meyerhoff, Miriam. 2014. "Variation and Gender." In T*he Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality: Second Edition*, Eds. Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff and Janet Holmes, 87-102. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Moore, Darnell. 2009. “Theorizing the "Black Body" as a Site of Trauma: Implications for Theologies of Embodiment.” *Theology & Sexuality* 15: 2, 175-188.

Queen, Robin. 2014. “Language and Sexual Identities.” Eds. Susan. Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff and Janet Holmes, 203-219. London: Blackwell, 2014.

Rich, Adrienne. 1980. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *University of Chicago Press* 5:4, 631-660.

Robles, Lola, and Cristina Jurado. 2021. *Hijas del futuro: Literatura de ciencia ficción, fantástica y de lo maravilloso desde la mirada feminista.* Madrid: Consonni.

Russ, Joanna. 1995. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction.* Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Serano, J. 2020. *Whipping Girl: El Sexismo y la Demonización de la Feminidad desde el Punto de Vista de una Mujer Trans.* Madrid: Ménades.

Solórzano, Daniel, and Tara Yosso. 2002. “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8:1.

Survin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Van Dijk, Teun. 1991. *Racism and the Press.* London and New York: Routledge.

—. 2009. *Discurso y Poder.* Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial.

Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer. 2015. *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies: Third Edition.* New York: Sage.

Received: December 13, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 103-121.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

HETERONORMATIVE TECHNOLOGY: JEANETTE WINTERSON'S OUTLOOK FOR PROGRESS

Clàudia Martori
Universitat de Barcelona

In the last two decades, Jeanette Winterson has shown a growing interest in the limits and consequences of the evolution of technology, which have a political and ethical impact. Winterson sees in bodily modifications through the use of technology the perpetuation a social model that preserves the objectification of women, the subordination of bodies to the sexual preferences of the heterosexual male, and the reinforcement of heteronormativity. Faced with this reality, Jeanette Winterson cannot help but wonder about the impact that heteronormative technology is going to have on women, especially on the younger generation, who is going to grow in a society with such sexist standards. In her sci-fi novels, Jeanette Winterson predicts a future that is already part of our present: the cosmetic surgery industry lives off physical changes fuelled by a social pressure driven by male desire, and the creation of *sexbot* prototypes further reinforces said aesthetic patterns. In her essays she strengthens these ideas on the basis of current technological development and predicts future developments based on what the big enterprises are currently working on and what their short-term goals are. Needless to say, none of these projects seem concerned about the gender inequality in their developments. Thus, the author takes a pessimistic

perspective on technological evolution as she faces a society whose pillars promote inequality, making it rather hard to eradicate them.

Keywords: Jeanette Winterson; posthumanism; transhumanism; heteronormative technology; Artificial Intelligence

1. With Technology Comes (D)Evolution

Although Jeanette Winterson is well known for writing stories that tackle love, sexuality, and gender, she also has several novels and texts that deal with the use of technology in a society that is in constant progress —progress and technology being indivisible in the 21st century. What is more, although some of these texts are fiction novels, as Donna Haraway states: "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (1991, 149). For that reason, Winterson uses fiction to make a critique of the turn that the evolution of technology is taking, especially as regards its implementation on the creation and modification of bodies.

In *Art & Lies*, Winterson equals progress and technology, and claims that human beings dislike that which is artificial except when it is related to technology (2014, 185). According to her, that is because the technological is socially perceived as a sign of development. She discusses the idea of science and technology being regarded as progress and says: "I will admit that we have better scientists, if by better, we agree that they are more sophisticated, more specialised, that they have discovered more than their dead colleagues" (2014, 107). And then goes on to say: "Genetic control will be the weapon of the future. Doctors will fill the ranks of the New Model Army. And of course you will trust me, won't you, when I tell you that with my help, your unborn child will be better off? The white coat will replace the khaki fatigue as the gun gives way to the syringe" (Ibid.). Thus, progress through technology and science also works as a tool for social control, given that both are a reference for progress and the population has a blind belief in those that work for the scientific and technological

development, even though the ethical limits of those are often questionable.

On the other hand, in *The Stone Gods* Winterson questions said idea by presenting the notion that, as technology evolves, there is a regression in the human species[1]. In the novel, the capabilities of human beings are reduced, and their brains shrink due to a lack of use of those. That is because, in the novel, technology has evolved so much that machines and robots that can carry out most of the tasks that used to be carried out by human beings.[2] Technology, then, causes human beings to become *interpassive* in relation with technology; as Slavoj Žižek defines it, "[i]nterpassivity, like interactivity, thus subverts the standard opposition between activity and passivity: if in interactivity […] I am passive while being active through another, in interpassivity, I am active while being passive through another" (1999, 105).

In relation to that, Marina Garcés claims that we live in a society that has incorporated gadgets which can make up for the intelligence we are supposed to have, but because human beings now delegate intelligence to technology, there is no need to hide human stupidity (2021, 10-11). Being fully aware that machines are programmed to be more efficient and make less mistakes than human beings —despite the fact that these robots are only set to complete specific tasks and it is currently impossible to have one that carries out as many jobs as a human being can—, machines are thus perceived as stronger and smarter than people. What happens, then, is that the utopia that is *solutionism* becomes the goal towards which society moves, aiming at delegating intelligence to machines in the hope that doing so will solve all problems —thus, expecting a perfect society as an outcome (Garcés 2021, 55). The result of this, however, would be far from perfect, leading to a complete loss of

[1] To which Kerim Can Yazgünoğlu adds that when it comes to posthumanism destruction is also part of the equation in some cases (2016, 158).

[2] In her analysis of the novel, Patrycja Podgajna reads it as "a dystopian vision of technological progress, in which excessive cosmetic surgeries, genetic manipulations and robotic enhancements lead to dehumanization and social disintegration" (2018, 88).

responsibilities for human beings while, at the same time, there would also be a growing loss of cognitive skills as a consequence of the increasing delegation of functions to artificial intelligence.

2. Technology Applied to Bodies

Artificial intelligence is not only an external complement for human beings but can also be merged with their bodies. With the implementation of technology on bodies, the role of the human being has changed in society, and body modifications have become another tool to boost this capitalist society: "[n]o longer physically driving the machinery of capitalist production, the body has assumed a different role within the free market: it has become the centerpiece of capital acquisition. It is an entity not only to be adorned, but to be worked on and transformed through self-reflexive body projects" (Dolezal 2015, 91). On top of that, with the partial robotisation of the body, the line between human and mechanical is becoming increasingly blurred. However, the gender binary is largely present when it comes to the perception of human bodies, as well as in the modification of those bodies through the use of technology, the implementation of pieces of technology onto the body, and the creation of fully mechanical bodies.

Historically, human beings have performed the role appointed to them according to their sex. As Judith Butler claims in *Bodies That Matter*, gender performativity is neither constructed nor determined, but much more complex given all the social determiners that play a role in the process of that performativity (1993, 94-95). Butler continues to say that:

> "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (95).

Thus, performativity entails constraint as regards the way one looks, acts, speaks, and moves so that the being interiorises the gendered behaviour that has been assigned to them. Gender performativity is

still greatly imposed on people —despite the great efforts that are being made to break with stereotypes and the gender construct— and body modifications help *perform* one's gender more easily, as one's looks are modified to better fit the stereotype.

In *Metamorphoses,* Rossi Braidotti discusses the posthuman body,[3] and states that the posthuman body is perceived as an Other given that it is hybrid, as there is a part of it that is cyborg.[4] For that, as she claims, the body has a monstrous element, as it is both frightening and fascinating (2002, 216). Júlia Braga Neves uses the term "monstrosity" when discussing Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* and claims that, while in novels like *Frankenstein* this monstruous quality is placed in the physical appearance of the character, Winterson goes one step further and places said monstrosity in the human ambition to transcend (2020, 158).

Nonetheless, body modifications tend to vary depending on the person's gender, and that is because body stereotypes of male and female bodies are different —and, in this binary-based society, non-binary bodies are not very much contemplated by the patriarchal power. Despite the shared monstrosity of hybrid and modified bodies, the unattainable stereotypes created for female bodies lead to a higher pressure to fit those stereotypes, as their bodies tend to be further away from that stereotype than male bodies are. Thus, the chances of having more *monstruous* female bodies are higher, which just adds another layer to the fact that a sexist society like ours already labels women as Others.

---

[3] By that we refer to a body that transcends nature through modifications done with the help of technology.

[4] That hybrid, monstruous, posthuman body does not necessarily have to be a body with a bionic arm, for instance; cosmetic surgery does imply a modification of the body through surgery and the use of technology. Following this idea, Rosi Braidotti claims the following: "with their silicon implants, plastic surgery operations and athlete-like training, the bodies of Dolly Parton, Michael Jackson, or Jane Fonda, Cher and many other 'stars' are no less cyborg, or monstrous, than anything out of the *Aliens* film series" (2002, 244).

What Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* presents are the sexist and binary beauty standards of a futuristic society that enhances bodies through technology in order to fit those stereotypes; Kerim Can Yazgünoğlu describes it as a text where "[m]ale and female corporealities in this posthuman society are still objectified, sexualized, medicalized, programmed, controlled, oppressed, and technologically engineered" (2016, 151). Winterson presents the physical appearance of the people in the first chapter of the novel by saying that "[a]ll men are hunk like whales. All women are tight as clams below and inflated like lifebuoys above. Jaws are square, skin is tanned, muscles are toned" (2007, 19). So, she presents a humanity that has very different standards of beauty for men and women, but where everyone turns to surgery and implants to be able to fit those unnatural standards. Thus, body modifications and enhancing appear to be unavoidable in a future where beauty standards become completely unnatural.

3. Social Pressure

When discussing the modification of bodies, one has to bear in mind that in many cases the choice of modifying one's body comes from the pressure exerted by social stereotypes. It is essential to be aware that this social pressure is a reality for all types of gender, as our society imposes fitting into the gender binary. Nonetheless, cosmetic surgery is generally applied to more female bodies than men's due to the greater difficulty that women have to attain those unnatural stereotypes. As Anne Balsamo claims, the feminine body is culturally perceived as imperfect by nature and needs body modifications to become perfect according to the stereotypes (1996, 71).

Those stereotypes that generate pressure on the population appear due to the demands and requirements of the heteronormative power, which, as Rosi Braidotti claims, builds people's identities (2002, 33). Men are on top of the social scale, and "[m]asculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege"

(Halberstam 1998, 2). Thus, the preference of the male is always going to prevail, as gender norms are made to "represent a binary caste system or hierarchy, a value system with two positions: maleness above femaleness, manhood above womanhood, masculinity above femininity" (Reilly-Cooper 2016).

Nonetheless, it is the heterosexual man who has the most power —on top of other representations of the male gender— because "what we call "dominant masculinity" appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power" (Ibid.). Because of that, heterosexual men are the ones that build the prototypes of the ideal body. When they do that, they aim at satisfying their own desires and fantasies, and not those of the people who want —or feel the need— to fit into these stereotypes.

The description we find in *The Stone Gods* of men and women's physical appearance fits with the patterns of a patriarchal society like ours; Michaela Weiss highlights this issue in Billie, who she sees as "trapped within the imposed understanding of femininity, even though she, as a lesbian, does not fit the heteronormative system" (2013, 183). The novel presents the posthuman body through cosmetic surgery, modifications, and body implants that make men muscular so that they project an image of strength and power over women, whose big size is focussed on their breasts. But despite the differences, in both cases they seek perpetual youth.

Thus, the heterosexual man creates an image of himself that allows him to perpetuate his powerful and dominant role while he builds an image of women that satisfies his own sexual desires. It becomes clear, then, that any sexuality other than heterosexuality and any non-normative gender representation —as well as any body that does not fit the standardised pattern (Marks de Marques and de Carvalho Krüger 2018, 160)— will be segregated and labelled as Other.

On the other hand, as claimed by Braga Neves, in *Frankissstein* the mechanised and sexualised female body appears with the development of *sexbots*, which are robots that satisfy their users sexually and whose designs are strongly influenced by the porn industry (2020, 166). The different designs present different

types of sexualised women, like sporty and Asian, and perpetuate a sexist and objectifying view of women. The same type of *sexbot* is discussed in Winterson's essay book *12 Bytes*; in it, she examines body stereotypes and the consequences of those being present in the creation of sex dolls. She says that "[love] dolls show off tiny waists, elongated legs, and big, or bigger boobs […]. The porn-star babe is the default doll" (2021, 147). These models are unattainable and therefore a harming stereotype for women to have, given that they will never be able to look like them without modifying their bodies through surgery. This also occurs in our current society with photo editing through Photoshop, which creates impossible standards for and high pressure on women who think those body features are attainable and *normal*.

Moreover, the *sexbots* presented in *Frankissstein* are solely and exclusively created to guarantee male pleasure. Most of these *sexbots* are female, except for one male model designed, which is intended for the use of clergy men. The reason given for that is a functional one: Ron Lord, the character that designs the *sexbots* in the novel, claims that it is impractical to create a male robot to satisfy women, which perpetuates the assumption that the whole female population is heterosexual. Further, the reason why he sees that as impractical is because he assumes that *sexbots* always have to be passive subjects, and he does not contemplate the idea of a woman being the active subject in interaction with a *sexbot* —nor with another person, for that matter.

As regards the heteronormative pattern of said technologies, Luna Dolezal highlights the roles imposed on each gender within the gender binary. In her words,

> Biotechnologies do in fact often reproduce and reinforce negative heterosexual patriarchal dynamics, where women are figured as passive, receptive, and dominated, while men are active, self-determining, and productive. Not only are these stereotypes reinforced when considering women's motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery, but they are also realized in the surgeon-patient relationship, which is overwhelmingly a male-female dynamic (2015, 99-100).

This statement refers to the discourse that Winterson presents in *The Stone Gods*, but it also applies to the other works discussed thus far, where the patriarchal heteronormative power has a strong influence in the creation and modification of bodies. Dolezal continues to say that this patriarchal structure is not only present in the willingness of women to follow these standards set by men, but also in the hierarchical relationship created in the operating room, where, according to statistics, it is mostly women getting surgery and men performing the surgery (2015, 100).

In Winterson's texts, women —given that there are no *sexbots* designed for them— have another way of satisfying themselves through technology: *teledildonics*. Howard Rheingold introduced this concept in his book *Virtual Reality* in 1991 and presented it by saying:

> The first fully functional teledildonics system will be a communication device, not a sex machine […]. Thirty years from now, when portable telediddlers become ubiquitous, most people will use them to have sexual experiences with other *people*, at a distance, in combinations and configurations undreamed of by pre-cybernetic voluptuaries. Through a marriage of virtual reality technology and telecommunication networks, you will be able to reach out and touch someone—or an entire population—in ways humans have never before experienced (345).

Thus, *teledildonics* is not about creating robots that satisfy the genitals that cannot enjoy the technology of *sexbots*, but about creating a technology that allows long-distance communication to satisfy one's sexual desires without missing the shared experience of sex. While the *sexbot* technology offers limited communication with an AI, *teledildonics* maintain human-to-human communication. The fact that Winterson's texts present *sexbots* as a tool for men and *teledildonics* as a tool for women once again perpetuates the gendered component in technological development.

In *Metamorphoses*, Rosi Braidotti supports the idea of *teledildonics* and sees it as an addition to our body, a technology which complements our physical abilities and limitations:

> On a more philosophical level, in relation to the embodied subject, the new technologies make for prosthetic extensions of our bodily functions: answering machines, pagers and portable phones

> multiply our aural and memory capacities; microwave ovens and freezers offer timeless food-supply; sex can be performed over telephone or modem lines in the fast-growing area of 'teledildonics' (2002, 18).

It is interesting to acknowledge that this definition refers to technology as an extension of human capabilities, which is precisely transhumanism's function nowadays —technology is implanted in the body to enhance human capacity. Then, according to Braidotti, *teledildonics* would be as much of a complement to the body as transhuman Neil Harbisson's antenna is.[5]

Furthermore, Winterson borrows this idea of *teledildonics* and starts including it in her novels as early as 1992, when she discusses this concept in her novel *Written on the Body*. There, she presents *teledildonics* as an alternative reality for humans, a virtual world within the real world where everything is virtual, even sex, but is still experienced through the human senses:

> As far as your senses can tell you are in a real world […]. If you like, you may live in a computer-created world all day and all night. You will be able to try out a Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can go into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework, add a baby or two, even find out if you'd rather be gay. Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you could simulate? And sex? Certainly. Teledildonics is the word. (Winterson 1993, 97).

Eight years later Winterson publishes *The PowerBook*, which is a novel based on this idea of *teledildonics*. The concept is not explicitly mentioned in the novel, but the whole virtual relationship between the two characters, grounded on virtual communication for sexual purposes —one offers the sex narrative and the other one consumes it—, is indeed based on that idea. She explicitly discusses the concept again in *Frankissstein*, this time offering a definition

---

[5] Neil Harbisson became the first transhuman when he had an antenna implanted on his brain in order to perceive colour frequencies. Harbisson has a very high degree of colour blindness and sees in black and white, and this antenna allows him to hear the frequencies of a wide spectrum of colour, including ultraviolets and infrareds. This antenna is viewed as tool that enhances the capabilities of his human body.

that is closer to the one that Howard Rheingold proposed in 1991: "the idea […] is sexplay with your partner, or partners, from separate locations. It feels like they are in the room – doing things to you" (Winterson 2019, 34). The interesting idea presented in *Frankissstein* as regards *teledildonics* is that, in the society that Winterson presents in the novel, *teledildonics* are already a thing of the present, not just a theoretical concept.

Further, Artificial Intelligence and its many different purposes are thoroughly discussed in *Frankissstein*. Apart from discussing *sexbots* and *teledildonics*, the novel criticises that Artificial Intelligence is programmed with a sexist and heteronormative perspective. In a given moment in the text, Winterson writes: "[w]e know already that machine learning is deeply sexist in outcomes. Amazon had to stop using machines to sift through job application CVs because the machines chose men over women time after time. There is nothing neutral about AI" (2019, 76).

Thus, the social pressure that unrealistic stereotypes, body modification, and binary gender difference —and inequality— exert on people, and especially women, is deeply rooted in society. It is through Jeanette Winterson's discussion of those in her novels and essays that she points out the faults of this developing heteronormative technological system and helps the reader realise how much one has interiorised these ideas.

4. Satisfying the Heterosexual Man

The main purpose of designing bodies according to the standardised stereotype is to reach the heterosexual man's pleasure, whether it is the self-satisfaction of maintaining their position of power or sexual pleasure through a body tailored specifically for them to find sexually arousing. It is for that reason that —both in *Frankissstein*'s fiction and the real-life models that Winterson describes in *12 Bytes*— *sexbots* are equipped with huge breasts and tiny clothes. Further, the robot must adapt to the sexual preferences of the male user, and it is for that reason that fetishes are contemplated when

making them, as well as physical appearance, the type of clothing, the vocabulary they use, and the length of said vocabulary.

In *Frankissstein*, Ron Lord claims that a vocabulary of only 200 words is extensive enough for a man that also seeks company in their interaction with the robot. The text says:

> Deluxe [the model that is being described] has a big vocabulary. About 200 words. Deluxe will listen to what you want to talk about – football, politics or whatever. She waits till you're finished, of course, no interrupting, even if you waffle a bit, and then she'll say something interesting (Winterson 2019, 45-46).

Thus, it becomes clear that the goal is achieving the gratification of the male, even if in doing so the perception of the female figure is degraded.

Further, *Frankissstein* regards the nature of technology as sexist, never as neutral. However, how could technology not be sexist when compulsive heterosexuality and the heteronormative patterns have been socially implanted on people's minds since they were born? Sexism has been chiselled on human brains and individuals have accepted and normalised these behaviours and patterns. For that reason, these will unfortunately arise when creating new models of human and mechanised bodies.

Further, it is in *12 Bytes* that Winterson finally claims what she was hinting at in several of her previous novels:

> Love dolls are different because they are designed and made to look like the male-gaze stereotype, of an unlined, underweight, cosmetically enhanced version of the female form. Then, they are programmed to behave in a way that is the absolute opposite of everything that feminism has fought for; autonomy, equality, empowerment (2021, 158-159).

This idea was also pointed out in Luana de Carvalho Krüger's analysis of *The Stone Gods*, where she claims that all the issues that transhumanists see in the development of these mechanised —and partially mechanised— bodies could be prevented by taking these limiting factors into account in the (re)construction of those (2019, 80).

However, the question is: would these products sell if these mechanical bodies were made according to feminist principles? Would they still please the heterosexual male consumer? The answer is that if these products do not exist and these issues were not brought to the table when *sexbots* were being developed, then it is the heteronormative discourse that prevails when developing new technology. If the heterosexual man, who is at the top of the social pyramid, is the one who establishes social rules, then his preferences, desires, and internalised patterns will be forged not only into social rules and the collective imagination, but also human-made creations and developments.

Donna Haraway claims that the male-gaze is deeply unequal and seeks self-satisfaction, which has been strengthened with the appearance of technological apparatuses of vision. Her stance is the following:

> Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god-trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters (1991, 189).

Indeed, the male-gaze is very much present in the creation of technology and cyborgs, not only for its intention to achieve the male's self-indulgence in being in a god-like position, like in Michel Foucault's panopticon, but also in that it also satisfies the sexual desires of that who bears that male-gaze. Nonetheless, shifting from the male-gaze to a feminist gaze would involve destroying the hegemonic power and their dominating gaze, which seems rather challenging.

5. Consequences of Heteronormative Technology

Undoubtedly, there are several consequences when it comes to living in a sexist and heteronormative society that supports and encourages the modification of bodies in order to achieve one that fits the stereotype fixed by the most privileged member of the social scale: the heterosexual man. These consequences affect all members

of society, but especially those who are viewed as Others by the hegemonic power.

Firstly, it results in the objectification of the feminine subject and its perception solely as an object of desire. As Jeanette Winterson claims, "the sexbot question is not about a new technology as it is about backward-looking sexism and gender stereotyping" (2021,155). Thus, these stereotypes portrayed in technological creations perpetuate and even aggravate the pressure there is to fit those stereotypes and the sexist filter within the male gaze that affects how humans create and interact with each other.

In this manner, as Winterson suggests, technology is not about evolving towards a more advanced and skilled society, nor about creating something that was unthinkable before. Instead, it is about the damaging effects that it has on our society and the fact that it reflects a conservative and neoliberal mindset. Winterson's idea hints that we should not be celebrating scientific and technological progress if people's ideas remain outdated and encourage an unequal relationship with other members of society. What should be expected, then, is a relatively simultaneous evolution of both science and collective morality.

On the other hand, and as a consequence of this objectifying view in the heterosexual man, the perception of women as an Other is perpetuated. As Rosi Braidotti claims, "clearly, the woman occupies a troubled area in this radical critique of phallocentrism: in so far as woman is positioned dualistically as the other of this system, she is also annexed to the Phallus - albeit by negation" (2002, 79). So, within the gender binary, women are bound to men in that men are the ones to label women as Others; without the hegemonic male figure, women would have a completely different identity in not being the Other. Further, the hegemonic power builds their own identity in having an Other, as the oppressor would not be who they are without the figure of the oppressed. This link is tight and hard to break because both parts of the gender binary would lose their long-lived identities if said binary dissolved.

In building mechanised female bodies, the hegemonic power finds a new Other. According to Jeanette Winterson "AI-enhanced love dolls are being marketed as *alternatives*. Alternatives to sex

workers. Alternatives to a relationship with a woman. Alternatives to women" (2021, 145). What she suggests is that women and *sexbots* have an equal position as Others, whether they are human women or programmed ones. Winterson had already given thought to that in *Frankissstein* when she presented a debate as regards a real robot that was developed by Hanson Robotics: "the Hanson robot, Sophia, was awarded citizenship of Saudi Arabia in 2017. She has more rights than any Saudi woman" (2019, 74). These two statements go hand-in-hand for if a cyborg is given more rights than a woman in a country where the hegemonic power is strongly sexist, then this supports the idea that women and *sexbots* are equal alternatives for the heterosexual man. The fact is that women do not have the same level of rights everywhere in the world, and the same is beginning to happen with cyborgs. Moreover, both are seen as having the same purpose —satisfying the heterosexual man's desires— and so they become equal alternatives in his view.

Lastly, there is a normalisation of certain artificial aesthetic stereotypes or patterns that are clearly unethical. As for the former, in Winterson's texts we find bodies that are shaped through the use of technology, depicted through the huge size of breasts in *Frankissstein* and *The Stone Gods*, and a perpetual youth in *The Stone Gods*. The novels portray that through genetic or technological modification, which helps achieve a perpetually young body. The age that people seek for the female body is increasingly younger, which normalises such a terrible and immoral subject as paedophilia.

It is also important to bear in mind that the consequences of the production of technology based on heteronormative ideas are undoubtedly harmful. In the case of the male —not only the heterosexual man—, he might subconsciously create sexist behaviour patterns that might affect the way he treats non-male people and perpetuate the rooted sexism that exists in society. For women, however, it might create patterns of beauty and behaviour that are impossible to achieve, for a human being has limitations that a machine is programmed not to have. Thus, that would lead women to engaging in a competition with cyborgs, a contest that is impossible for women to win due to their inherent biological limitations.

Winterson reflects on this idea when she says that "[i]f the woman of choice is a programmable babe who never ages, never puts on weight, never has a period, never rips the face off him for being an arse, never asks for anything, or needs anything, and can never leave, are we really saying that will have no real-world impact on real-world women?" (2021, 149). As presented thus far, the negative impact that this has on women is evident: women cannot avoid having a personality nor a changing body, so they struggle when compared on an equal level to robots made in the image and likeness of the ideal women for the heterosexual man.

Further, it seems highly problematic that the perfect female body for the standard heterosexual man has neither a personality nor is a changing organism, for —according to what we have seen thus far— he desires a subject that is not human nor has human traits other than the external appearance of the mechanical body that portrays the image of the stereotypical female. What Jean-François Lyotard proposes in the introduction to *The Inhuman* is that human beings have a consciousness and the ability to reason thanks to the education they receive as children, for "they are not completely led by nature, not programmed" (Lyotard 1998, 3). Thus, if the perfect female model is based on a woman that has none of that —as well as having an unchanging body, which goes against the natural process of organic bodies— and is, in fact, a programmed machine, then it seems that the heterosexual man would want to claim humanity only for himself and not for their object of desire.

On the other hand, those who do not identify with the gender representation within the gender binary are bound to feel discriminated as they are not even contemplated within these patterns. Our society is based on a binary system as regards gender, which makes it easier for the man to identify himself when he only has one Other, and not many. Given that the hegemonic power is clearly conservative, it is built on binary oppositions that allow the heterosexual man to identify what he is and what he is not within the binary —male or female, organic or mechanic, good or bad. What he is not will become the Other, and anything can fall within that category. However, in the perception of a subject —whether organic or mechanic— as an object of desire, the criterion is simply

fitting into the hegemonic stereotypes of a desirable body, and that is where everything that is external to the gender binary is segregated.

Thus, the perspective of technological evolution that Jeanette Winterson presents is quite hopeless. That is because she believes it would be hard to eradicate the inequality from which our society has been built and that still remains, and sees technology as a tool that has only aggravated and magnified that situation. Therefore, Jeanette Winterson does not predict the egalitarian and ethical future that we so much want to achieve and in which we would like to live, but one where technology follows and perpetuates conservative heteronormative patters. From Jeanette Winterson's viewpoint, heteronormative technology —as problematic as it is— is the past, the present, and the future of this society.

References

Balsamo, Anne. 1996. Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women. London: Duke University Press.

Braga Neves, Júlia. 2020. '"I live with doubleness": Gótico, ficção científica e distopia em Frankissstein de Jeanette Winterson'. Abusões, 12.12: 145-171.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Butler, Judith. 1993. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex. Routledge.

de Carvalho Krüger, Luana. 2019. O limiar entre o corpo humano e o corpo robótico: transumanismo e pós-humanismo nas obras Deuses de Pedra, de Jeanette Winterson e Androides Sonham com Ovelhas Elétricas?, de Philip K. Dick. Universidade Federal de Pelotas, MA thesis.

Dolezal, Luna. 2015. 'The Body, Gender, and Biotechnology in Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods'. Literature and Medicine, 33.1: 91-112.

Garcés, Marina. 2021. Nova Il·lustració Radical. Barcelona: Anagrama.

Halberstam, Jack (Judith). 1998. Female Masculinity. Duke University Press.
Haraway, Donna J. 1991. Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. London: Free Association Books.
Lyotard, Jean-François. 1998. The Inhuman. Trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Marks de Marques, Eduardo, and Luana de Carvalho Krüger. 2018. "Transumanos e pós-humanos em 'Deuses de pedra': A valorização do corpo padronizado na distopia de Jeanette Winterson". Anuário De Literatura, 23.1, April: 154-73.
Podgajna, Patrycja. 2018. 'Trans/Post-humanist Poetics in Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods'. Roczniki Humanistyczne, 66.11: 87-97.
Reilly-Cooper, Rebecca. 2016. "The Idea That Gender Is a Spectrum Is a New Gender Prison." Aeon. Ed. Nigel Warburton. Web. <aeon.co/essays/the-idea-that-gender-is-a-spectrum-is-a-new-gender-prison>. [Accessed on August 31, 2021].
Rheingold, Howard. 1991. Virtual Reality. New York: Summit Books.
Weiss, Michaela. 2013. 'Jeanette Winterson's Stone Gods as Trans-world and Trans-gender Dystopia'. The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies. Osaka: The International Academic Forum: 178-186.
Winterson, Jeanette. 1993. Written on the Body. London: Vintage.
---. 2001. The PowerBook. London: Vintage.
---. 2007. The Stone Gods. London: Hamish Hamilton.
---. 2014. Art & Lies. London: Vintage.
---. 2019. Frankissstein. London: Penguin Random House.
---. 2021. 12 Bytes. Dublin: Jonathan Cape.
Yazgünoğlu, Kerim Can. 2016. 'Posthuman "Meta(l)morphoses" in Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods'. Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment, 7.1: 144-160.

Žižek, Slavoj. 1999. "Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?". The Žižek Reader. Eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright. Malden: Blackwell Publishing: 102-124.

Received: December 13, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

Notes

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 125-143.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

OPPRESSION IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*: A READING THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK FEMINISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Mónica García Morgado
Universidad de Valladolid

This article seeks to demonstrate the importance of reading contemporary African American women's fiction through the lens of Black Feminism in order to understand the undeniable reciprocal relationship between both. Hence, I analyze Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) under the light of Black Feminism and Intersectionality, following the works of acclaimed Black Feminists, to show Naylor's concern and portrait of the multiple oppressions Black women were subjected to in the United States in the second half the twentieth century, while fighting against those in her fiction. I conclude *The Women of Brewster Place* is a literary masterpiece both for the study and for the identification of the influences of Black Feminism in contemporary African American women's literature to this day.

Keywords: Gloria Naylor; *The Women of Brewster Place*; Black Feminism; Intersectionality; Oppression

This paper argues that Gloria Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) can be interpreted as a fictionalized account of the multiple conflicts and traumas of contemporary African American women that arouse from their oppression and which are prime issues of concern of Black feminism and Intersectionality. After a brief introduction to Black Feminism to fight Black women's oppression, this paper reads and analyses the different forms of oppression Naylor's characters are subjected to, which go from oppression through race, to oppression through class, to oppression through controlling images, and, last but not least, oppression through sexual violence. This paper defends that Naylor created *The Women of Brewster Place* to fight all types of sexist and racist oppression while rejecting negative stereotypes about Black women, which she undoubtedly achieved with the final female liberation from the claws of Brewster Place. Hence, Naylor's novel is a literary masterpiece for the study of Black Feminism and Intersectionality, as well as for the identification of the influences of the movement in contemporary African American women's fiction.

Black women in the United States have suffered the oppression and consequent trauma inflicted by a country that has historically despised, marginalized, and exploited them as white supremacy created "a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to Black men, who are ranked third, and black women last" (hooks [1981] 2015, 78). Black women writers in the 1970s started a novelistic tradition of women-centered narratives that dwell deeply in Black womanhood, among which we encounter the works written by the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Gloria Naylor, to name but a few. These authors soaked their fiction work with Black women's experiences of alienation and oppression, first of all, due to their race and gender, while enhanced through the intersection with other categories, such as class and sexuality. In order to offer a global examination of the emergence of contemporary Black women's literary tradition, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Bernard W. Bell notices a repetition of patterns in the novels Black women have written since 1970, which include a representation of "motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist

oppression," "centrality of female bonding," and "a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community," among other patterns (1987, 242-43), all of which are at the core of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*.

1. Black Feminism and Intersectionality: Fighting Black Women's Oppression

> Let me state here and now that the Black woman in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave."
>
> Frances Beal, *Double Jeopardy*

Despite the connection Bell signals between the women's liberation movement of the 1960s in the United States and the resurgence of African American fiction written by Black women (1987, 240), the lack of inclusion of Black women in mainstream—white—feminism is a fact because "*white* women speak for and as *women*" (Crenshaw 1989, 154). Frances Beal claimed that Black women are victims of a double subordination—that she denominated "double jeopardy" ([1970] 2005, 109)—determined by their gender and race. The duality of factors that determines Black women's oppression also connects to postcolonial theory and feminism, in particular with the idea of "double colonization" (Spivak 1988, Carby 1997) which means that women are "doubly colonized by imperial/patriarchal power" (Ashcroft et al. 2000, 66). Yet Beal's "double jeopardy" is also linked to W.E.B Du Bois' "double consciousness" ([1903] 2007, 8) that addresses the ambiguity of Black consciousness found in the identity doubleness of being Black and American. Thus, with Americanness implied, the idea of "double jeopardy" specifically refers to what is meant, felt, and experienced as a Black (American) woman. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective's Statement claimed Black women are victims by "interlocking oppressions" (Taylor 2017, 15), not just their gender and race, but also class and sexuality. Later, Deborah King assured that the majority of previous visions of Black women's oppression were faulty and simplistic, as they took oppressive factors as "merely additive" (1988, 47), and developed the following theory:

> Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems. An interactive model, which I have termed multiple jeopardy, better captures those processes. / The modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism.(1988, 47)

To solve this misunderstanding, King proposed instead to use the term "multiple consciousnesses" (1988) to address and study Black women's experiences appropriately, which could be argued to be a gendered—Black feminist—evolution of Du Bois' "double consciousness." The multiple and multiplicative discrimination of Black women is also the main concern of critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," who alleged that the discriminatory experience of Black women is found in the no-man's-land of race and gender:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination [Beal's "double jeopardy"]—the combined effects of practices that discriminate based on race, and the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (1989, 149)

To accurately analyze the discrimination of Black women, Crenshaw proposed the study of "intersectionality," which is the rejection of a "single-issue framework" (1989, 152). In other words, intersectionality is the joint study of race, gender, class, and sex as interconnected factors of discrimination. From that point onwards, Intersectionality became foundational for Black feminism.

Despite the turn of the century and an apparent social evolution, Black women experience a unique type of discrimination in the United States and are still excluded from white feminism (Jerkins 2018, McMillan Cottom 2019, Kendall 2020). Recently, Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to address "the specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed towards Black

women," which not only takes their life experiences as irrelevant but also silences them (Gassam Asare 2020). As for the connection between Black womanhood and fiction, Hill Collins contends that African American women's literature has been a useful weapon to unmask Black women's experiences, functioning as the "legitimate voice for African American women's [political] thought" (qtd in. Bragg 2015, 69). Works of fiction capable are of performing a counter-process of de-silencing their experiences by putting them in the spotlight, which this paper performs in the following section through the analysis of the multiple oppression the female characters face in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

2. Brewster Place: Oppression through Class and Race

Black women's class oppression needs to be understood from a historical perspective. The enslaved state of Black women in the United States since 1619 and their ulterior discriminatory treatment as African Americans, explain why Gina Wisker notes that [Black] women are "in a double or triple position of colonial subordination through gender, race and economic position" (2000, 10), which resembles Hazel V. Carby "triple oppression" (1997, 45). According to Beal, economic inferiority reduces Black women to a "state of enslavement" ([1970] 2005, 114) even in modern times.

With the creation of several independent yet interconnected narratives and multiple protagonists, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor offers a fictional portrait of the anti-essentialism sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom claims in *Thick* when discussing the Black women's situation in the United States: "… there is not just one black woman experience, no matter how thick one black woman may be" (2019, 12). In the novel, the polyphony of Black women's lives is achieved through the parallel storylines of Mattie Michael, Cora Lee, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Luciella Louise Turner, Lorraine and Theresa—also known as "the two" for their romantic relationship—who are fictional echoes of lower-class African American women in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States. Hence, Naylor chronicles the lives of seven Black women from different ages, families, and

backgrounds because "… *each in her own time and with her own season had a story*" (*TWBP* 5)[1] and who only share their place of residence, Brewster, which is determined by the intersection of their class and race.

Brewster is the physical representation of oppression in the combination of class and race, highlighting their "enslaved state" as poor Black women. Being an all-Black impoverished community, Brewster is a place with a narrative and consciousness of its own, *"Brewster place knew that unlike its other children, the few who would leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason*" (*TWBP* 4). Brewster is delimited by a wall that isolates its inhabitants, representing their inability to escape it, while contrasted to another place of liberation, Linden Hills, the community to which African Americans only have access if from a higher socioeconomic status. In this sense, Brewster is a cage for these women and has constructed its own identity through the cocktail of individual narratives of African American women that made that space a place during their imprisonment. As the title of the novel indicates, Mattie, Cora, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Luciella, Lorraine, and Theresa are *the women of a place*, and that changes everything.

3. Oppression through Controlling Images

Following the basis of intersectionality, Hill Collins alleges that African American women have been reduced to a set of negative stereotypes—*controlling images*—to justify their oppression ([1990] 2000, 69). In the complex picture of the intersecting oppressions of African American women in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor included some of the negative stereotypes about Black women connected to motherhood to defy them. The most

[1]The abbreviation "*TWBP"* has been used throughout this paper in in-text citation when quoting directly from *The Women of Brewster Place.*

pervasive stereotypical image that haunts Black women to this day is that of the "superstrong Black woman," which forces them to "be strong and be solely responsible" for the well-being of their families (Elliott and Reid 2016, 50). Mattie Michael is the best representative of the superstrong Black woman stereotype among all the protagonists and secondary female characters. She is a single parent that has no support from her family or the father of her child. She devotes her life to her son, Basil, and adopts a motherly identity forgetting her individuality. Basil becomes her entire world and the only man in her life, and she is finally transformed into an asexual mother. Another example of a superstrong Black mother in *The Women of Brewster Place* is Eva Turner, who is so by helping Mattie when they first meet and gives her a place to stay, but she is also a "superstrong Black woman" as she raises alone her orphan granddaughter.

Moreover, Hill Collins highlights two controlling images that have existed since slavery times and which are related to Black motherhood: the mammy and the matriarch. The mammy is the ideal Black woman in a white supremacist context because she has accepted her racial and gendered inferiority. She works for whites and teaches her children their inferior place in the world ([1990] 2000, 73-74). A literary example of the mammy is Pauline Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2019), who only finds satisfaction at the white home. Opposite to the mammy is the matriarch, a Black woman who rejects her subordination to white supremacy and patriarchy alike and who is often depicted as unfeminine and emasculating (Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 75), like Sofia in Walker's *The Color Purple* ([1982] 2017). Unlike the mammy, who neglects her biological children, matriarchs take care of their children to their best (Sewell 2013, 314). *The Women of Brewster Place* lacks a character that might fully fall into the stereotype of the mammy or the matriarch, yet Naylor merged both into one character that adopts each role depending on whether she is in the public—white—sphere or the private—Black—sphere. This is the case of Elvira, Ben's wife. Elvira acts like the traditional mammy in the public sphere by accepting her subordination to whites and neglecting her daughter's well-being. She is not the servant to the white family, but her handicapped daughter, whom

she encourages to sleep—or rather subject to sexual coercion—with Mr. Clyde, their white boss—a relationship that signifies "double colonization" (Spivak 1988, Carby 1997). Elvira performs "the mammy role" indirectly through her daughter, as she is teaching her to accept her inferiority in the white-dominated patriarchal world because, unlike Ben, she normalizes the fact that her daughter spends nights, alone, at the white widowed man's house. Once in the private (Black) sphere, she is a matriarch who emasculates her husband. She insults Ben, "And if you was even quarter a man" (*TWBP*, 178), and deliberately harms his masculinity by insulting him and constantly blaming him for their economic situation. The height of Ben's emasculation comes when she abandons him for a lover, making Ben fall into a life of self-loathing, loneliness, and alcoholism. Hence, in the mixture of these two stereotypes into one single character, Naylor refuses to reduce Black women to pejorative simpleton images that deny the complexity of their personalities.

Additionally, Hill Collins contends that with the emergence of contemporary African American women, another controlling image emerged: "the welfare mother" ([1990] 2000, 78). This image is that of a social parasite because the woman in question is categorized as a "sexually promiscuous single African American mother who scams taxpayers by having babies then demanding public support" (Foster 2008, 163). For instance, Sapphire overtly explored in *Push* ([1996] 1998) this idea of African American women as suckers of welfare through the figure of Precious' mother. *The Women of Brewster Place* has its own perfect stereotypical welfare mother: Cora Lee. Cora is obsessed with having babies haunted by the reality that "*babies grow up*" (*TWBP* 140), while she neglects her older children. As each of her children has a different father, she is also seen by others as sexually promiscuous—which connects with the controlling image of the Jezebel that condemns Black women as sexually insatiable (Davis [1981] 2019, 163)—as she is visited at night by lovers who are reduced to unknown shadows. Cora Lee struggles to sustain her family for she does not work and survives thanks to welfare and yet, despite her economy, she keeps having babies. However, her constant pregnancies seem to be connected to an emotional search for love and personal

fulfillment, rather than the ambition of being economically aided month by month.

The only controlling image Hill Collins identifies outside of motherhood—and sexuality—is that of the Black Lady. These are diligent, educated, and professional Black women that "allegedly take jobs that should go to more worthy White, especially U.S. White men" ([1990] 2000, 81). In other words, Black women who have accessed a higher class, and who represent a collapse of the hierarchy of power based on race, gender, and class. Nevertheless, there is no representative of the stereotypical Back Lady in the novel, which fits with the impoverished context of Brewster Place, but also because the novel lacks the white male gaze. The picture is that no woman living in Brewster Place would fulfill the requirement of higher class to be a Black Lady.

4. Oppression through Sexual Politics and Heterosexism

"She ain't nothing but a woman"

Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*

Nothingness, the level to which C.C. Baker and his gang reduce Kiswana to for her (Black) womanhood, but also because she is not afraid to confront them, which causes in them a feeling of emasculation. As a consequence, they perceive her as the inferior to be dominated—the shrew to be tamed. Like many African American novels written by Black women in the last decades of the twentieth century, gender violence is overtly present in *The Women of Brewster Place* and rules the dialectics of Black women-and-Black men interpersonal relationships. Naylor explored in depth Black sexual politics in her novel, by looking at how her protagonists interact with the men of their community and families. While lovers are anonymous and secondary—as in Cora Lee's storyline—the remainder of the men have names, like Ben. They are husbands, fathers, neighbors, young gangsters, and even the Pastor of the community. In doing so, Naylor reinforces the idea that, as members of the African American community, they are insiders to Brewster's reality and central to Black women's experiences.

The sexual politics of Black heterosexism and its connection to violence are other of the predominant forms of oppression that subjugate Black women, and a key issue of Black feminism. As highlighted in the Combahee River Collective's Statement, apart from racism, Black women also experience the added jeopardy of sexism inside their own communities (Taylor 2017, 19) due to patriarchy. While Hill Collins alleges that a great percentage of Black women are victims of domestic violence in their homes ([1990] 2000, 159), hooks posits Black women have long-accepted male subjugation understanding it as a reflection of frustrated masculinity ([1984] 2015, 76). In *The Women of Brewster* Place, for instance, a young and pregnant Mattie Michael is brutally beaten by her own father, who wants to discover the identity of the baby's father. As Mattie's "patriarchal owner" (Connell [1995] 2005, 83), he uses violence to reinforce and demonstrate his power as the head of the family. Naylor depicts the brutality of the attack in a mesmerizing manner by reducing the body of Mattie to a moaning "pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor" (*TWBP* 27). Already, in the first storyline, Naylor is pointing to gender violence masked as father-to-daughter abuse. In the same narrative, when Butch Fuller—Mattie's lover and the father of the baby—proudly says that his other female lovers fancy him when other men "are ignorin' 'em or beatin' and cheatin' on 'em" (*TWBP* 17) he is normalizing the presence of gender violence against Black women in romantic and private relationships.

Among all the possible forms of gender violence—physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual—rape is the most exploited in African American fiction. *I Know Why the Caged Bird* Sings ([1969] 2007), *The Color Purple* ([1982] 2017), *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2019), and *Push* ([1996] 1998) are examples of it as they expose the rapes of their protagonists within their homes and communities, attacked by Black men from their own families—ironically, those who should protect them—which stresses Black women's sexual vulnerability inside the Black private sphere (McMillan Cottom 2019, 193). This, following Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinities ([1995] 2005), could be an instance of protest masculinity. Marginalized masculinity—which is at the bottom of the hierarchy of power concerning other masculinities and

is determined by factors external to gender, such as race, class, ethnicity, and age (Connell [1995] 2005, 80; Messerschmidt 2019, 87)—might evolve into protest masculinity, "which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty" (Connell [1995] 2005, 114). This stresses the interlocking oppression of race, gender, sexuality, and class and clarifies that Black men are not naturally violent, but their oppression might simultaneously result in more violence to claim hegemony, as hooks posit ([1984] 2015, 76). Consequently, Black male violence might be projected towards those who are their inferior beings: Black women.

Opposed to the historical rape of Black women by white men during slavery—as white slaveowners used sexual coercion over their female slaves to reinforce their power and domination (Davis [1981] 2019, 19-20)—denominated "racial-sexual oppression" by the Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017, 19)—Hill Collins claims that now Black women are often victims of intra-racial sexual violence and that they rarely report their attacks ([1990] 2000, 147-48). Once again, Black sexual violence may mirror the historical control of Black women's bodies in white supremacy. However, the silence that Hill Collins points to might not be that of shame, but an attempt to protect Black men from the Black-rapist narrative, a myth born about Black men during slavery, which complemented the myth of Black women's sexual deviance (Davis [1981] 2019, 163; 163; Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 81), having the "burden" of protecting Black men's reputation and respectability (McMillan Cottom 2019, 193). In *The Women of Brewster Place,* the first instance of sexual violence within the Black family sphere is the case of Luciella Louise Turner—also known as Ciel. Her husband blames her for their economic situation when she gets pregnant for a second time—"'I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills that's all you good for" (*TWBP* 110)—and forces her to get an abortion—another violent act that reaffirms her subordination to her husband as her "patriarchal owner" (Connell [1995] 2005, 83)—plus she is also a victim of marital rape. Not only is she obliged to go through an unwanted abortion that causes her to dissociate from her body to alleviate psychological pain, but also the pregnancy is—in between the lines implied—the result of "the raw urges that crept,

uninvited, between her thighs on countless nights" (*TWBP* 106). Ciel's silence roots in her social status as a wife, as she feels she must commit to her husband's sexual demands at all times, lacking the right to express both her sexual and non-sexual desires. Inevitably, Ciel falls victim to sexual victimization and domination in her own home and marriage.

Besides, Black lesbians might suffer the added hazard of heterosexual oppression, as signaled by the Combahee River Collective's Statement already in 1977 (Taylor 2017, 15) and Hill Collins ([1990] 2000, 128). Following Barbara Smith's words, "homophobic people of color are oppressive not just to white people, but to members of their own groups" as they view homosexuality as a "white disease" (1998, 114) and, particularly, within the Black community, same-sex attraction is alienated from Blackness (1998, 124). In addition, Smith refers to "The Black Church Position Statement on Homosexuality" that attacked and censored same-sex activity for departing from the Bible (1998, 128). Although heterosexuality rules the majority of the stories, among her female characters, in *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor included a lesbian couple that would experience rejection from their same gender as well as the brutal attack of patriarchy. The homophonic attitude of the Black community is portrayed in the aversion Sophie feels towards Lorraine and Theresa. First, Lorraine is confronted by Sophia who openly despises them for what she calls their "nasty ways" (*TWBP* 168) as they are sexually deviant for her and even declares them *personae non gratae* in Brewster. Nonetheless, Sophie's homophobia, more than personal values and morals, symbolizes Black homophobia in the entire African American community as her abhorrence has roots in religious belief:

> What they [Lorraine and Theresa] are doin' – living there like that – is wrong, and you [Etta] know it. … The Good Book say that them things is an abomination against the Lord. We shouldn't be havin' that here on Brewster and the association should do something about it. (*TWBP* 162)

In contrast to Sophie's homophobia, Naylor follows the previous scene with a conversation between Mattie and Etta. Mattie tells Etta—the latter doubts the "correctness" of Lorraine and Theresa's

relationship—that she has (non-sexually) loved other women even more than she ever (sexually) loved her male romantic partners and insinuates that this sense of sisterhood or bonding between Black women might not be as far-fetched as it seems from their lesbian neighbors' love (*TWBP* 163), which resembles Alice Walker's "womanism" ([1981] 2014, 81) and stands for the union Black feminism encourages.

Even if bell hooks alleges that Black women might use a declaration of homosexuality—in particular, lesbianism masking other sexual preferences—to escape the claws of heterosexism ([1984] 2015, 153), Lorraine and Theresa become the greatest victims of the intersection of their gender, race, and sexuality, for they embody the absolute "other." In the novel, their lesbianism is not enough to protect them from the harmful side of heterosexism. From the beginning, Lorraine is exposed to a generalized male gaze that objectifies and sexualizes her, "she was used to being stared at – by men at least – because of her body" (*TWBP* 154). Later, the male gaze is transformed into a physical invasion of her body when Lorraine, who has never had sexual intercourse with a man, is brutally raped by a group of six young African American men from Brewster—the already mentioned C.C. Baker and his gang. Naylor depicts the rape in detail, the shifting of men over her body and the killing pain, even including a straight-arrow against patriarchy with the statement, "So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence – human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (*TWBP* 197). Lorraine does not have the chance to report her rape, as both her body and mind are in total decay after the brutal attack, which metaphorically represents the silence mentioned earlier in this paper (Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 147-48). She is left to die at night on the street, which highlights the murderous nature of Brewster, and when she wakes up the only word she will utter for the rest of her life is "please." When she partly recovers her conscience, she drags herself around confused, with a brick in hand, and kills the first man she encounters, her neighbor Ben and who was the only person she considered a friend in Brewster because he never judged her for her sexual preferences. Consequently, the other neighbors take Ben as responsible for Lorraine's attack, finding triggers both in his mental

state and alcoholism. Furthermore, Lorraine's rape, apart from standing for a sexual act of domination, is used to criticize the domination of Black women in patriarchal society and phallocentrism:

> "Hey, C.C., what if she remembers that it was us?"
> "Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain't got no fingerprints."
> They laughed and stepped over her and ran out of the alley. (*TWBP* 199)

The "dicks" with no fingerprints might be understood as a globalization of all men, who are reduced to their genitalia as their primary form of identity, while also exposing masculine privilege in patriarchy and the threat this symbolizes for women. Then, Lorraine's rape symbolizes the murderous result of the intersectionality of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

5. Overcoming Oppression Together: Female Bonding and the Triumph of Black Feminism

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

The flight of the Phoenix; the historical flight of resilience of Black women who have spread their wings out of their cages, like the poetic voice in Angelou's poem. This flight of overcoming oppression—or the first step towards it—is the finale of *The Women of Brewster Place*. The protagonists plan a block party that is suddenly interrupted by rainy weather. The envisioning of blood in the bricks of the wall of Brewster—being first, a remainder of Lorraine's rape; and secondly of their oppression—prompts these women to destroy it fiercely and desperately, "Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hand" (*TWBP* 215) projecting their unstoppable fury onto the wall. A scene that stands for a metaphorical battle against everything that oppresses them and

paralleling the fight of Black feminism. When Kiswana alerts Ciel there is no blood on the bricks but rainwater, the reply of the latter is "'Does it matter? Does it really matter?'" (*TWBP* 216). Indirectly, Ciel is clarifying to Kiswana that even if they are aware that what they see is not blood, the wall has a meaning of its own and its mere presence is a reaffirmation of their subordination and multiple oppressions. Therefore, as long as it stands on its foundations, their situation will remain the same. With the destruction of the wall, Naylor's protagonists take off a flight of self-liberation.

Besides, their fight against their intersectional oppressions is accompanied by the death of Ben. Despite the innocence of this man for Lorraine's rape, his death is a *deus ex machina* against patriarchy and the culmination needed to destroy Brewster Place. At the beginning of the novel the narrator exposes that both Ben and the wall are the only two natural things to Brewster, "*Ben and his drinking became a fixture on Brewster Place, just like the wall. It soon appeared foolish to question the existence of – they just were*" (*TWBP* 4). Hence, only when both are eliminated from their reality, these women do have the chance to change and improve their lives. The importance of these ultimate acts of liberation is that, despite the tense relations among some of the characters, they all come together at the end, paralleling the unitary fight of Black Feminism. Only then, like air, they rise.

6. Conclusion

As a polyphonous women-centered novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* has an undeniable richness in its representation of the endless experiences of Black women. Overall, Naylor highlights the networks of Black women in their communities, exploring how they support and help each other with its hopeful and activist ending. As this paper has shown, the oppressions through class and race are covered in the construction of Brewster as a cage for lower-class Black women, who are metaphorically chained to it. In this sense, their race and gender are the crucial factors that determine their life experiences and possibilities. Gloria Naylor surpassed the oppressive pictures of African American women by giving each *controlling image* a narrative that provides context to explain the

protagonists' lives. Even if Mattie is an incredibly strong—resilient—woman, even if Cora Lee is a mother that needs the Government's support to raise and feed her children, and even if Elvira is a mammy-matriarch cocktail, they are more than a static image. They have a name, an identity, and a story of their own. Through the reappropriation of traditional stereotypical images, Naylor reinforced the polyphony of the Black women's experience, while celebrating them as well as their strength. In this way, Naylor defied racial and sexist stereotypes of Black women demonstrating that they are victims of a system of racial and sexist subjugation while proposing a change for future generations through other characters like Kiswana. Also, gender violence appears in all its forms and could be argued to be Naylor's greatest contribution. The representation of violence appears *in crescendo* in the novel, starting with Mattie's beating by her biological father, and ending up with Lorraine's public rape on the streets of Brewster. In this manner, Naylor exposes the harmful side of heterosexism and Black sexual politics at all levels, showing that there is no safe place for Black women, neither in the private nor in the public sphere when it comes to their interaction with Black men, who exert the domination of patriarchy over them.

To conclude, Gloria Naylor offers an encouraging message to her contemporary and future readers with her novel. Her characters are the perfect example that union makes strength. Despite their differences, they all fight together for the same goal: their liberation. Briefly, *The Women of Brewster Place* is a literary masterpiece for the study of Black Feminism and Intersectionality through fiction, as well as for the identification of the influences of the movement in contemporary African American women's fiction. The novel is a recollection of the different forms of Black women's oppression while reinforcing the importance of Black feminism and Intersectionality for the study of those, unveiling the multiple experiences of Black women. It is not only race and gender that matters, but also class and sexuality, and how they inflect each other.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (MICINN) for the research project "Critical History of Ethnic American Literature" (reference PID2019-108754GB-I00).

References

Angelou, Maya. [1969] 2007. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. London: Virago.

---. 1978. "Still I Rise." *Poetry Foundation*. Web. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise> [Accessed on October 15, 2021].

Ashcroft, Bill, et al, ed. 2000. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Beal, Frances, ed. [1970] 2005. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Edited by Toni Cade Bambara. New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Washington Square Press: 109-22.

Bell, Bernard W. 1987. "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism." *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 235-280.

Bragg, Beauty. 2015. *Reading Contemporary African American Literature: Black Women's Popular Fiction, Post-Civil Rights Experience and the African American Canon*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books.

Carby, Hazel V. 1997. "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood." *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. Eds. Heidi Safia Mirza. London and New York: Routledge.

Connell, Raewyn W. [1995] 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8: 139-167.

Davis, Angela. [1981] 2019. *Women, Race, and Class.* London: Penguin.

Du Bois, W.E.B. [1903] 2007. *The Souls of Black Folks.* Edited by Brent Hayes Edwards. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elliott, Sinikka, and Megan Reid. 2016. "The Superstrong Black Mother." *Contexts*, 15.1: 48-53.

Foster, Carly Hayden. 2008. "The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion." *Race, Gender & Class*, 15.3-4: 162-179.

Gassam Asare, Janice. 2020. "Misogynoir: the Unique Discrimination that Black women Face." *Forbes*, <www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/09/22/misogynoir-the-unique-discrimination-that-black-women-face/?sh=46a2ff9356ef> [Accessed 20 November, 2021].

Hill Collins, Patricia. [1990] 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge.

hooks, bell. [1981] 2015. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. New York and London: Routledge.

hooks, bell. [1984] 2015. *Feminist Theory*: *from Margin to Center*. New York and London: Routledge.

Jerkins, Morgan. 2018. *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Kendall, Mikki. 2020. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot.* London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, and Sydney: Bloomsbury.

King, Deborah H. 1988. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs*, 14.1: 42-72.

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. 2019. *Thick and Other Essays*. New York and London: The New Press.

Messerschmidt, James W. 2019. "The Salience of 'Hegemonic Masculinity'." *Men and Masculinities*, 22.1: 85-91.

Morrison, Toni. [1970] 2019. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage.

Naylor, Gloria. [1982] 2019. *The Women of Brester Place*. Bath: Fox, Finch & Tepper.

Sapphire. *Push*. [1996] 1998. London: Vintage.

Sewell, Christopher J.P. 2013. "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present." *Journal of African American Studies*, 17.3: 308-326.

Smith, Barbara. 1998. *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. New Brunswick.: Rutgers University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: MacMillan Education: 273-313.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, editor. 2017. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." *How We Get Free. Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago and Illinois: Haymarket: 15-27.

Walker, Alice. [1981] 2014. "Gifts of Power: The Writing of Rebecca Jackson." *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Harcourt: 71-82.

---. [1982] 2017. *The Color Purple*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Wisker, Gina. 2000. *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Received: December 1, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 145-156.
© The author, 2022
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

REIMAGINING ROALD DAHL'S FANTASTIC *MR FOX* (1970) IN THE 21ST CENTURY[1]

Ángeles Jordán Soriano
Universidad de Almería

Roald Dahl's writings are known for presenting a world where "most people are inherently greedy, selfish, ignorant and deserving of punishment" (Jordan 2015). For decades, these particular features have implied several challenges when adapting these stories into films fit for children. Although some of Dahl's best-sellers, like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) or *The Witches* (1983) were eventually released as films, this did not occur with *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970).

It was not until 2009 when the filmmaker Wes Anderson directed the first film adaptation of this book. In his productions it is frequent to find topics such as existentialism, class or feminism. Some scholars even argue that his films "seem to be in constant discourse with the 'real' world outside the cinema" (Scott 2014, 76). Thus, his version of *Fantastic Mr Fox* provides an alternative and more updated view of Dahl's story as it explores and deconstructs many stereotypes found in children stories, from the lack of female characters to different masculinities. For this reason, this paper aims to identify these changes and deliver an analysis of them in order to

[1] The research on this paper has been supported by Lindisfarne Research Group and the project CEI Patrimonio (University of Almería).

offer an insight into the ways in which the adaptation may enhance the content of the original book, approaching it to contemporary audiences, both children and adults.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; Children's Literature, Film Studies, Comparative Literature

1. Introducing Roald Dahl and Wes Anderson: Beyond the Boundaries of Children Stories

Fantastic Mr Fox was written and published by the British author Roald Dahl in 1970. At that time, Dahl was already a well-known author since, almost thirty years before, he had been commissioned by Walt Disney to write *The Gremlims* (1943), and six years prior to the release of *Fantastic Mr Fox,* he had published one of his most popular books, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Moreover, despite being known for children literature, he also wrote adult fiction and worked writing scripts for films and series such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Besides, he also participated in the first adaptation of his book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* which was released in 1971. Nevertheless, he would cease to allow any adaptation of his writings after having an incident with the 1990 adaptation of his book *The Witches* (Parker 2020). This adaptation was problematic since the directors, Jim Henson and Nicolas Roeg, decided to change the end in order to avoid the presence of explicit violence in the film, something common in Dahl's children stories (Jordan 2015). However, both Dahl and Henson would die this same year, so this film was finally released as most of the adaptations of his books would do in the years which succeeded the author's death. Examples of these adaptations are *Matilda* (1996) and Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), along with the film analysed in this essay, Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* released in 2009.

Nevertheless, it is also important to mention that, as happened with his previous books, *Fantastic Mr Fox* had also been adapted previously but merely into live performances. Among these

adaptations, we can find different formats such as David Wood's play in 2001 or Tobias Picker's opera in 1998. Considering this, Anderson's film would be the first and only filmic approach to this book.

Focusing on this film, it is important to take into consideration certain aspects concerning Wes Anderson. Having started his career as a director in 1996 with the film *Bottle Rocket*, this American filmmaker has been highly awarded being acknowledged several times with nominations in the BAFTA, The Golden Globes and the Academy Awards thanks to films such as *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), *Isle of Dogs* (2018) and the analysed film, *Fantastic Mr Fox.* (2009). It is worth mentioning that, among these nominations, he received the Golden Globe and the BAFTA awards for *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Hotel Budapest* (2014).

Going back to the current film, which was his seventh long production and his first stop-motion film, it is important to note that its script was co-written with Noah Baumbach, known for *The Meyerowitz Stories* (2017) and *Marriage Story* (2019). Despite the fact that it is difficult to consider if their script is either an adaption or a version, it is important to mention that some scholars do not explicitly consider this film an adaptation but merely a work which uses Dahl's book as "a primary basis" in order to introduce a completely new approach (Kunze 2014, 96). Moreover, in the film credits it is noted that the plot is based on the book. Nevertheless, since it is complex to offer a specific classification before having analysed further elements in the film, this idea would be fully explored in the next section, where I will analyse and compare different aspects in both, the film and the book.

2. A Comparative Analysis of *Fantastic Mr Fox*. Approaching a Children's Book in the 21st Century

In Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), the main character is an anthropomorphic fox who steals food from three farmers in order to feed his starving four children and wife. In his incursion into the

farms, he encounters other animals, some of them villains, like a rat he must defeat in order to get cider from one of the farmers' houses. Despite these kinds of challenges and problems—for instance, he loses his tail—he manages to steal the food and share it with his family and the other animals in the forest. It is worth noting how, in this way, Mr Fox is the main agent in the action of saving the other animals, since despite having certain help from his children, in the end, they stay at home with Mrs Fox, who, like most of the animals, do not take part in the action and merely encourage and praise Mr Fox for his abilities.

With regard to the film, the first feature praised by critics after its release was that, like in Dahl's stories, Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* provides mature and even philosophical concerns about life, something omitted in other adaptions of Dahl's books in order to be fit for children. This was highly praised by the film critic Roger Ebert who, after mentioning that some elements in this film may be too deep and crude for children, states that "a good story for children should suggest a hidden dimension, and that dimension of course is the lifetime still ahead of them" (2009). Wes Anderson's film uses the same central plot mentioned above but introduces new scenes and elements which add new themes and values to the story.

Taking this into consideration, the following sections will be devoted to the comparative analysis of these works. In order to provide a clearer understanding, this part is going to be divided presenting the main characters coupled with the themes they embody in both the book and the film. In the process, the changes between both are going to be analysed and discussed by taking into account the opinion of experts and by textual analysis.

2.1. Mr Fox, the Intended Hero in a Modern and Consumerist World

One of the most significant differences that viewers may find when approaching the filmic adaptation is the different use of the statement which entitled both this film and the book. In the case of the latter, it is Mrs Fox the one who calls her husband "a fantastic fox" when at the end of the book he has succeeded in stealing all the food and sharing it with the other animals (Dahl 2017, 50).

Consequently, he is considered a hero and the meaning of 'fantastic' in the book is literal. Nevertheless, in the film, this statement is highly ironical as she calls him "kind of quote-unquote 'fantastic' fox" (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 1:17:48). The reason behind Mrs Fox utterance may be that her husband is a kind of hero, but not a traditional one, provided that in the plot of the film he reaches his goal of stealing the food thanks to the help of the rest of the animals, including their son and Mrs Fox herself. Moreover, this ironic use would be in tune with the style of Anderson and many coetaneous filmmakers who are "between the irony ascribed to their Generation X group and a reactionary sentimentality" (Dorey 2012, 172). Besides, there are also negative implications in the social pressure that being a "fantastic fox" implies. In fact, when the safety of their son is compromised—since in an attempt of being a hero too he escapes to fight the farmers—Mr Fox states that the problem was that he wanted everyone to think he was "the greatest, the 'fantastic' Mr Fox" (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 51:42).

Further differences concerning this character are that in the film he is a journalist who is not satisfied with his life, as he recalls his exciting past as a stealer: "I used to steal birds but now I am a newspaperman" (7:40). This discontent with daily and normal life is also very frequent in Anderson's films (Kunze 2014, 77). Besides, this unhappiness would introduce new topics to the plot of this story such as existentialism and class mobility since he aspires to become more than just a journalist, e. g. acquiring a bigger house. Taking this into consideration, the desire of being a stealer again may be more grounded on Mr Fox's will to escape from a monotonous lifestyle and even on a consumeristic desire, as in this case, he does not actually need what he is stealing. In fact, Matt Duncan mentions how there is a very powerful message concerning consumerism in the film since "Mr Fox was once preoccupied with buying the right products, owning the right tree, and engaging in the right sort of consumer activities" and at the end of the film he turns "more aware of others, Mr Fox expresses a sort of indifference or detachment from these goods and activities" (Duncan 2015, 166). This approach may give a new dimension to Mr Fox's loss of his tail and the fact that he made it 'detachable' in the film.

2.2. Felicity or Mr Fox: Towards Female Representation

If in the book Mrs Fox does not own a proper name, in the film she is called Felicity, something which may allude to Felicity Dahl, the author's widow, who also supervised this film as she had done previously in other adaptations of her husband's book such as *Matilda* (1996) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005).

Mrs Fox having her own name in the film could be understood as an anticipation of her more active role in this adaptation. Moreover, this is enhanced by the fact that, in the first scene seen in the film, both Mrs and Mr Fox are stealers, in contrast to the Mrs Fox depicted in the book, who stays at home during all the adventure and as Adrienne Kertzer remarks, even their small children are depicted as more able to fight and steal with their father than Mrs Fox (Kertzer 2011, 16). Indeed, she claims that in Dahl's books these traditional gender roles abound and that many of them were maintained in adaptations of other of his books. Nevertheless, in the case of *Fantastic Mr Fox*, this film "functions as both a tribute and a critique, differing significantly from previous filmic adaptations that never consider challenging Dahl's depiction of adult women" (17).

Moreover, further scenes show Felicity prone to fight when protecting her son or being suspicious when her husband lies to her in order to go stealing (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 23:40). These moments stand as proof of her depiction as an active character, as important and intelligent as her husband in the development of the story.

2.3. Children: Self-acceptance and New Masculinities

In Anderson's adaptation, the four children of Mr and Mrs Fox are substituted by their only son Ash and their nephew Kristofferson Silverfox. Both would have a more crucial role in the plot than that of the children in the book, who behave as a collective character and no other details on their names and personality are provided.

With these two teenage foxes, the film will explore several topics completely ignored in the book. In the case of Ash, he

introduces ideas such as the lack of self-esteem, the complexity of teenage years and problems such as bullying and frustration. All these feelings lead him to feel inferior and unable to be a hero like the one he observes in the comics he loves. On the other hand, Kristofferson is intelligent, sensitive, sportive and modern. Both attend the same high school, where we can observe their relationship with other teenage animals. With regard to this, it is worth mentioning how Wes Anderson states that these two characters are based on his relationship with his older brothers, who made him feel overshadowed (Browning 2011, 161). In fact, it is one of Anderson's brothers the one who voiced Kristofferson (161). The fact that it is a biographical reference makes the relationship between the cousins more realistic, introducing topics such as the negative effects of having bad standards, the importance of self-acceptance, self-esteem and new masculinities. This last one can be seen especially in Kristofferson, since he breaks many traditional gender stereotypes, for instance, he normalises being sensitive, expressing his feelings and crying when necessary. Besides, he offers a deeper glance at actual problems, since he is adopted because his father is ill with pneumonia.

The fact that children must face problems more proper of adults and be sensible and philosophical is also a distinctive feature in Anderson's production, where adults have irresponsible and childish behaviour (Kunze 2014, 12). Therefore, this film does not just explore the contrast between human and animal behaviour but also among adults and children as it "rejects the binaries of childhood and innocence versus adulthood and experience" (Mendez Troutman 2019, 190). This same pattern can be observed in other of Anderson's films such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) or *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), where it can be found another recurrent element also seen in this adaptation: the figure of the child prodigy represented by Kristofferson, since it is mentioned several times that he is good at many arts and a professional Olympic athlete.

Back to Ash, the fact that he feels unable to fit within the model of traditional hero he aspires to be may resemble his father's problems when pretending to be a 'fantastic fox'. In fact, due to his actions to impress his father, Kristofferson is captured. Moreover,

through this character, Anderson introduces several dialogues where black humour abounds. For instance, when Mr Fox loses his tail, instead of just saying that it would grow soon — as the foxes in the book do —Ash states that "it is not half as bad as double pneumonia" alluding to his cousin's father (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 31:04). Due to the presence of elements like the former quotation, opinions on the targeted audience of this film are divided and reviews are described as a "dense web of allusions grounds for wavering between praise of the film and uncertainty about children getting the jokes" (Kertzer 2011, 8).

2.4. Anthropomorphic Animals and Humans: Nature and Civilisation

In the book, the animals' role is merely that of blaming Mr Fox for the fact that "half of the wood has disappeared" because the farmers' are using digging machines to capture him (Dahl 2017, 30). Consequently, the anthropomorphic fox mends this by sharing his stolen food, being this action the one that grants him the role of a hero among animals. Nevertheless, in the film, Anderson provides a collective hero instead of an individual one. In this more democratic approach, after having attempted to be a standard hero or an actual "fantastic Mr Fox", the main character realizes that he is not able to defeat the humans alone. Therefore, in this case, Mr Fox is not the individual hero seen in the book, since they all achieve the victory together by using their own and different abilities.

Concerning the dimension of the conflict, in this case, it is not just Mr Fox against the farmers but all the animals against all the humans. The differences between these two groups are also enhanced by subtle details. Todd McCarthy claims how "the film maintains a linguistic divide between British-accented humans and American-accented animals" (McCarthy 2009, 25). This may be due to Anderson's tendency to always works with the same cast. Therefore, it is not striking to consider that he used this recurrent American cast to voice the main characters, while, on the other hand, he counted on British actors to allude to the actual setting and nationality of the author of the book.

Moreover, it is also worth highlighting that, contrary to what occurs in the book, there do not seem to be actual villains among animals, especially concerning the rat which appears in the book and fights them to not share the cider of one of the farmers. In the film, he seems to have values and further reasons to behave like this, as his arguments for fighting are that he prefers to die before betraying the humans who allow him to drink their cider. In fact, Mr Fox himself praises his loyalty and honour stating that he was another "victim of the system" (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 58:00).

Besides, in general, animals in the film are more anthropomorphic than those described in the book as they wear human clothes and have human habits. Nevertheless, there are few exceptions for non-anthropomorphic animals in the film. Some of them are the humans' dogs and hens who live on the farm. The fact that these characters are depicted as domestic animals, not able to speak, is significant since they are the only ones who fight on the side of humans. Moreover, this non-anthropomorphic depiction may enhance the differences between the animals who live in nature and those kept and used by humans in a civilised world. Further proofs that animals embodied the natural world and humans represent civilisation is the fact that the final victory of the animals in the film is not the dinner they have in the book, but the conquest of a human state-of-the-art supermarket.

With regard to the presence of consumerism in animals mentioned in previous sections, Matt Duncan highlights how this ending may epitomise its important role in the film and hence in current society, since the ending is "the point at which his [Mr Fox's] pessimism about his situation finally turns into hope and optimism" as "his escape into the supermarket with his family and friends is the fulfillment of that hope" (2015, 266). Nevertheless, like Mr Fox, this time, all animals seem to have learnt a lesson, as they are encouraged to consume just what they needed in order "to share with everybody" (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 1:22:03). With this action, they may reject the consumerism found in human behaviour. Moreover, the fact that in this last scene Mrs Fox announces to be pregnant again—like at the beginning of the film—stands as a cyclical structure and suggests that the Fox family is going to return to their former life in a burrow, outside human civilisation.

3. Final Comments and Conclusions

Considering all this information, it can be said that if Dahl's books for children are known for his innovative style which often portrays a reality "where horrible things can happen at any moment" and where "most people are inherently greedy, selfish, ignorant and deserving of punishment" (Jordan 2015), Anderson's approach seems to maintain the same dark and mature tone. Moreover, at the same time, it is innovative as well in breaking with traditional stereotypes and introducing new topics and values to the viewers.

In the film adaptation there are more topics related to adults' problems, however, they are portrayed in a childish way. This is also more common in the period in which this film was produced following a postmodernist approach, since this version is, above all, a postmodernist adaptation which adds to the story of the book elements such as irony, black humour, consumerism, authenticity and the struggle for having an identity and a better life. Moreover, it introduces deeper and philosophical ideas, like all the previously exposed: diversity, in the fact that all the animals are equally useful; and gender equality, in the important role and presence of Mrs Fox, something omitted in the book.

Besides, this version also provides hints of intellectualism, contemporary concerns such as bullying in schools and even biographical elements, like the problems between Anderson and his actual brother, reflected in Ash and Kristofferson. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this is a stop-motion film, a genre commonly associated with children's films, it is important to bear in mind that under a postmodernist view, it does not have to imply this idea. As the scholar Michael Bracewell supports, cartoons and this kind of childish style ceased to be just a children's genre especially after the 1990s, where we can find other examples of cartoons targeted to an adult audience such as *The Simpsons* or *South Park* (2002, 128). The fact that this film may be targeted at this kind of audience would support the common use of dark humour, which sometimes may seem inappropriate for some children.

Therefore, to conclude it is important to highlight that, despite including almost all the elements present in the book in terms of plot

and characters, this adaptation stands as a more contemporary example of the values of the book, as it reapproaches certain concepts and standards deconstructing any stereotype. In the case of Mr Fox, he is not portrayed as the perfect and only hero, and he is as brave as his wife. Moreover, it can be seen how Kristofferson is not ashamed of his feelings proving that heroes can be sensitive. For all these reasons, I am inclined to think that this film may enhance many aspects of the book, as it depicts diversity and provides new values over the same base. Hence, this renovation of the main story introduces this book to a younger audience who may not be familiarised with this author and this book.

References

Anderson, Wes, and Noah Baumbach. 2009. *Fantastic Sr. Fox*. 20th Century Fox Animation, Indian Paintbrush, Regency Enterprises and American Empirical Pictures.

Bracewell, Michael. 2003. *The Nineties*. London: Flamingo.

Browning, Mark. 2011. *Wes Anderson: Why his Movies Matter*. Praeger.

Dahl, Roald. *Fantastic Mr Fox*. 2017. Westport: Vision Australia Personal Support.

Dorey, Tom. 2012. "Fantastic Mr Filmmaker: Paratexts and the Position of Wes Anderson as Roald Dahl's Cinematic Heir." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 10, 1, 169-185.

Duncan, Matt. 2015. "Consumerism, Aristotle and *Fantastic Mr Fox.*" *Film-Philosophy* 19, 249-269.

Ebert, R. 2009. "I feel a strange compulsion to pet that fuzzy fox fur". *Roger Ebert.com*. Web. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fantastic-mr-fox-2009> [Accessed 5 Mar 2021].

Jordan, Louis. 2015. "Summer Of '90: Nicolas Roeg'S The Witches". *Slant Magazine*. Web. <www.slantmagazine.com/film/summer-of-90-the-witches/> [Accessed 6 Mar 2020].

Kertzer, Adrienne. 2011. "Fidelity, Felicity, and Playing Around in Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox.*" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 36, 1, 4-24.

Kunze, Peter C. 2014. *The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indiewood Icon*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McCarthy, Todd. 2009. "Welcome to the Dahl house." *Variety*, 416, 10, 24-31.

Mendez Troutman, M. J. 2019. "The Reign Of Childhood In Wes Anderson's Moonrise Kingdom". *The Palgrave Handbook Of Children's Film And Television*. Eds. Casie Hermansson and Janet Zepernick. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Parker, James. 2020. "Would Roald Dahl Have Liked Wes Anderson's Adaptation Of Fantastic Mr Fox?". *Slate Magazine*. Web. <https://slate.com/culture/2009/11/would-roald-dahl-have-liked-wes-anderson-s-adaptation-of-fantastic-mr-fox.html> [Accessed 5 Mar 2020].

Scott, J. D. 2014. "'American Empirical' Time and Space: The (In) Visibility of Popular Culture in the Films of Wes Anderson." *The Films of Wes Anderson*. Eds. Peter C. Kunze. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Received: December 9, 2021
Revised version accepted: April 1, 2022

CONTRIBUTORS

Irati Aguirrezabalaga Berra completed her undergraduate studies in English at the University of Salamanca and her MA in Drama and Performance Studies at University College Dublin. She is doing her PhD at the University of Salamanca, where she focuses on musical theatre and its relationship to fandoms. She is interested in contemporary musical theatre, gender and queer studies, drama, and popular culture.

e-mail address: iratiab97@gmail.com

Sofía Alférez Mendia graduated in English Studies in 2020 at the University of Almería. This year she has also obtained my Master's degree in English Studies: Professional Applications and Intercultural Communication at the same university, and has been granted a scholarship for the initiation to research which belongs to the "Plan Propio de Investigación y Transferencia" from the University of Almería. So far, her research interests lie within the fields of Irish Literature, Philosophy, Gender Studies, and Feminism.

e-mail address: sofiaalferezmendia@gmail.com

Mónica García Morgado is passionate about African American women's fiction and Black Feminism and has a great interest in US Popular Culture in the fields of popular fiction, film, and television series. She is currently working on her master's thesis on Brit Bennett's novels, and she aims to enter a Ph.D. program to research twenty-first-century African American women's fiction.

e-mail address: monica.garcia.morgado@outlook.com

Patricia Guill-Garcia is currently a second-year PhD student in Applied Linguistics at the University of Valencia. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Studies and a Master's Degree in Advanced English Studies, which she carried out at the same university. Her research is mainly focused on the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, with a specific interest in technology and interaction in the foreign language classroom.

e-mail address: patricia-guill@hotmail.com

Beatriz Hermida Ramos has a BA in English Studies (University of Salamanca) and an MA in Applied Linguistics (Complutense University of Madrid). She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Salamanca (Spain), where she studies discursive representations of power, resistance and otherness. Her main research interests are Critical Discourse Analysis, science fiction, gender and sexuality.

e-mail address: bhermidaramos@gmail.com

Ángeles Jordán Soriano obtained her Bachelor's Degree in English Studies at the University of Almería in 2019 and earned her Master's Degree in English Studies at the University of Almería in 2020. In 2021 she obtained the Patricia Shaw Research Award granted by The Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN). She is currently working on her Ph.D. dissertation on the influence of politics in culture during the 1960s in Great Britain. Her research focuses on the artistic production during Harold Wilson's first government (1964-1970).

e-mail address: ajs895@ual.es

Claudia Martori is currently enrolled in the Construction and Representation of Cultural Identity doctoral program at Universitat de Barcelona and is working on a thesis that focusses on posthumanism and transhumanism in the work of Jeanette Winterson. She graduated from English Studies at the same university and holds a master's degree in Comparative Studies of

Literature, Art and Thought from Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Her research interests are contemporary literature, contemporary philosophy, artificial intelligence, and film.

e-mail address: martoriclaudia@gmail.com

EDITORIAL POLICY AND AUTHOR GUIDELINES

Gaudeamus is a peer reviewed journal published by **ASYRAS** (Association of Young Researchers in Anglophone Studies). It welcomes original unpublished proposals by MA/PhD students and early-career researchers covering a wide range of topics within the scope of English Studies. Contributions must be written in English and not considered for publication elsewhere.

Reviewing process

Contributions will be assessed by expert referees following a blind peer-review policy. The papers will be considered for publication if they receive favourable reports from reviewers. Once accepted, the authors may be requested to consider the suggestions made by reviewers and/or editors following the journal's style sheet.

Selection of contributions

Papers must deal with one of the fields of study covered by our journal. Selection criteria include originality, interest, and relevance for the specific field. Methodological rigour, consistency and innovation will be taken into account, as well as style and command of academic English.

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism is the unethical act of using others' prior ideas, processes, results or words without explicit acknowledgement of the original authors and sources. Plagiarism is considered academic

dishonesty and a breach of journalistic ethics, and some cases of self-plagiarism can also be considered a form of scientific misconduct. Therefore, all manuscripts submitted to *Gaudeamus* will be checked using the plagiarism detection software *Turnitin* to prevent the journal from publishing plagiarized content.

If the plagiarism detection program presents a high similarity index the manuscript will be automatically rejected by the editorial staff and not considered for publication in the journal. However, citation improvement may be required if the similarity index is considerably low. After undertaking the necessary corrections, the manuscript could be resubmitted.

Copyright Notice

Authors who publish with this journal agree to retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. Also, authors will retain the rights on their work, even if they will be granting *Gaudeamus* a non-exclusive right of use to reproduce, edit, distribute, publicly communicate and show their work. Therefore, authors are free to engage in additional, independent contracts for non-exclusive distribution of the works published in this journal (such as uploading them to an institutional repository or publishing them in a book), as long as the fact that the manuscripts were first published in this journal is acknowledged.

Publication Guidelines for Contributors

Gaudeamus accepts proposals in the form of articles and notes. **Articles** ought to be about **6000 words** in length; **notes** should be around **3000 words**. The work's **title**, an **abstract of 200 words** approx. and **3-5 key words** need to be included in the manuscript, which is to be sent in Word format to gaudeamusasyras@gmail.com. All details of the author —name of

author, affiliation, postal and email address, and a brief bio-note (60 words approx.) — should be included in a separate attachment as a cover sheet, never in the manuscript itself.

After a positive evaluation, manuscripts not conforming to the guidelines provided in the following sections will be returned to the authors for further revision.

Citations

Contributions should follow the author-date guidelines of the latest edition of the ***Chicago Manual of Style*** to adjust to the style, structure and format of the journal.

Double quotation marks should be used for text quotations. If exceeding four lines, block quotes should be separated from the main text and the whole quotation indented on its left margin.

References should be formatted as follows:

In-text references: "local authenticity in the songs by Arctic Monkeys is conveyed by means of the use of northern English traits such as the BATH and STRUT vowels (Beal 2009, 238)" or "local authenticity (…), according to Beal (2009, 238)".*

*If more than one work by the same author is included in the bibliography, the citation should include letters after the publication year, e.g. (Beal 2009b, 238).

Block quotes (five or more lines):

> Other factors would facilitate less protracted and intimate forms of dialect contact in nineteenth-century Britain: the growth of the railways in the later part of the century allowed for greater mobility and provided transport links to (or, more likely, from) previously isolated locations, and the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling in 1870 meant that all children were exposed to the Standard English of the classroom (Beal 2012, 131).

If part of the original text is omitted, three dots with brackets should be included.

Bibliographical References. Examples

Monographs

French, Marilyn. 2008. *From Eve to Dawn, A History of Women, Volume I: Origins*. 4 vols. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Multiple works by the same author

O'Neill, Louise. 2014. *Only Ever Yours.* London: Quercus.
---. 2015. *Asking for It.* London: Quercus.

Edited book

Vieira, Fátima, ed. 2013. *Dystopia(n) Matters. On the Page, on Screen, on Stage.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

Chapter in an edited book

Suvin, Darko. 2003. "Theses on Dystopia 2001". *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination.* Eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. London and New York: Routledge: 187-202.

Translated book

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. By Colin Smith. London and New York: Routledge.

Two or more authors

Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Murnane, Richard, et al. 2012. "Literacy Challenges for the Twenty-First Century: Introducing the Issue". *The Future of Children,* 22.2: 3-16.

Articles

Sargent, Lyman Tower. 1994. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited". *Utopian Studies,* 5.1: 1-37.

Reviews

Tyldesley, Mike. 2000. "The Hutterian Experience." Rev. of *The Golden Years of the Hutterites* by Leonard Gross; *An Annotated Hutterite Bibliography* by Maria H. Kristinkovich and Peter C. Erb; *The Hutterites. Lives and Images of a Communal People* by Samuel Hofer. *Utopian Studies* 11. 2: 203-208.

Online Journal

Adar, Einat. 2017. "From Irish Philosophy to Irish Theatre: The Blind (Wo)Man Made to See". *Estudios Irlandeses,* 12: 1-11. Web. <https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Art%C3%ADculo-1-Adar-1.pdf> [Accessed on April 22, 2019].

Websites

Davies, Mark. 2013. *Corpus of Global Web-Based English: 1.9 billion words from speakers in 20 countries (GloWbE).* Web. <http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe> [Accessed on January 15, 2020].

Further guidelines

— Use the font Times New Roman (12) and single-space the manuscript.
— The first line (only) of each paragraph should be indented.
— Footnotes should be kept to a minimum.
— Titles, headings and subheadings should be capitalised following academic English standards.
— Double inverted commas should be used for "Titles of articles" or "Quotes embedded within running text"; simple inverted commas for 'Emphasis' and 'Meanings'; and italics for *Book Titles*, *Foreign Words* and *Lemmas*.
— No bold font should be used.
— When page numbers are used for citation, they should be included within parentheses and without abbreviations such as p. or pp.
— Style should be coherent throughout the whole text: British or American English.

— Long dashes should be used for additional comments, and the spaces between dash and comment should be removed.
— Footnotes numbers must be included after punctuation marks.
— Tables and figures must be titled and numbered; e.g. Table 1: Most frequent spelling traits in the corpus.