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THE QUEST FOR MENTAL TRANQUILITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *UNDER WESTERN EYES*



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Abstract

In Joseph Conrad's novel *Under Western Eyes* (1911), Razumov is a kinless university student in St. Petersburg who involuntarily becomes the government's agent as regard to espionage because of an unwelcome visit from the revolutionist student Haldin. This paper makes use of C.T. Watts' article "*Under Western Eyes: The Haunted Haunts*" published in 2008 as a framework to investigate Razumov's psychological journey: beginning with his decision to betray Haldin through to the consequential action of making a confession to the latter's sister, Nathalie. Watts' article explores both the haunting and exorcist aspects of the novel upon its author, characters and, possibly, the reader. The article primarily focuses on how Conrad's novel intentionally mimics *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Several aspects of the narrative reveal to us that Conrad failed in avenging the haunting effect Fyodor Dostoyevsky's work had upon him. In this paper, the rationale behind Razumov's confession will be investigated in understanding how both physical and mental exhaustion stimulate moral struggles and alter one's assumed ideology. Emphasis will be made on the transformation of Razumov in terms of the effect of acquiring domestic connections and arriving in different geographical locations as the plot complicates.

Key words

Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, nationalism, psychological journey, confession

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* was published in 1911. An essay written by C.T. Watts entitled "*Under Western Eyes: The Haunted Haunts*" was published in *The Conradian* in 2008. It explores both the haunting and exorcist aspects of the novel upon its author, characters and possibly the reader. Watts' discussion has primarily focused on how Conrad's novel is a mimicry of *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Several aspects of the novel reveal to us that Conrad failed in avenging the haunting effect of Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) and his work upon him.

It is worthy to note that Conrad wrote the novel during the time when he suffered from both financial stress and psychological burdens. While the problem of debts pressurized his literary creation, Conrad finally experienced a mental breakdown in early 1910 (*UWE* 2007, xviii). Doctor Clifford Hackney diagnosed

Conrad's state as a "complete nervous breakdown" (Stape 2007, 172). Conrad's massive debts to his literary agent J.B. Pinker (1863-1922) could be a reason that resulted in his exasperation. Besides, it is also believed that the subject matter of *Under Western Eyes*, particularly in relation to Russian despotism, aroused much impact upon Conrad's emotions towards his own upbringing and nationality. In *Collected Letters* (vol. IV) Conrad himself remarked how "[t]he subject has long haunted me. Now it must come out" (qtd. in *UWE* 2007, xix).

Being inspired by Watts' notion of haunting, it is the purpose of this paper to study the rationale behind Razumov's confession in relation to the haunting effect of betrayal and moral struggle. Razumov's initial action is characterized by his fear of uncertainty when he is first involved in Haldin's assassination of Mr. de P-. Owing to the fear of insecurity, many Conrad's characters share the common quality in their everlasting quest for safety. Some notable examples include Amy Foster in the short story of the same title (1901), Adolf Verloc in *The Secret Agent* (1907), and Alvan Hervey in the short piece "The Return" (1932). While the tradition of depicting the theme of safety could have originated from modernist writings that schematize ontological threat, it is not hard to notice that all these works have aligned domestic crisis with safety concerns. In this paper, emphasis would be made on the transformation of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, particularly in terms of the effect of acquiring domestic connection and arriving in different geographical locations as the plot complicates.

The Establishment of an Identity

The novel begins with the description of Razumov as a man who needs to secure his position by means of establishing a proper intellectual identity of the Russian tradition. Razumov is, according to the novel, "the man who called himself, after the Russian custom, Cyril son of Isidor - Kirylo Sidorovitch – Razumov" (*UWE* 2007, 5). Being born out of wedlock and thus without a legitimate status, it is obvious that he attempts to wipe off any stains which may affect his future career, particularly in a bureaucratic society. The reader is soon informed that the narrator of the novel, who is a teacher of languages, adopts an ironic tone in referring to Razumov. That the narrator says "there was nothing secret or reserved in his life" ironically foreshadows how Razumov struggles between the possibility of achieving personal fame of a selfish kind and devoting to people's well-being (*UWE* 2007, 8).

When Haldin is facing fatal risk after murdering Mr. de P-, he comes to seek refuge from Razumov. Although they have never been very close, Haldin explains this unusual choice as being related to both Razumov's "superior mind" and absence of domestic ties (*UWE* 2007, 18):

It occurred to me that you – you have no one belonging to you – no ties, no one to suffer for it if this came out by some means. There have been enough Russian homes

as it is. But I don't see how my passage through your rooms can be ever known (*UWE* 2007, 18-19).

While Haldin sees Razumov's lack of familial connections as an advantage, the latter holds a drastically dissimilar attitude. Razumov imagines his solitary downfall when being arrested. He believes that criminals with relatives or social acquaintances may be able to obtain necessities and other crucial conveniences through them. Most importantly, he points out the fear of being forgotten as an orphan with no family members or close friends. The dilemma occurs, not only in terms of Haldin's and Razumov's different perspectives, but also within Razumov himself. Haldin's terroristic avenging behavior blooms from his selfless concern towards humanistic progress. Instead of regarding himself as a terrorist or destroyer, he has made a remarkable confession in the novel that "the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity" (*UWE* 2007, 19). He thus regards his act as righting the wrong. On the other hand, Razumov places ontological safety above all. Though he wants to become somebody with status in society, he also tries to be as invisible as possible in this vast country under strict social surveillance. In *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background* (1990), D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke analyses the role played by the Russian social identity upon Razumov's individual choices and suggests that "Razumov's ambitions are not intellectual, but social; his social background is more important than his clear mind" (Goonetilleke 1990, 161). Razumov has also confessed to Haldin that "the only ties I have in the world are social. I must get acknowledged in some way before I can act at all" (*UWE* 2007, 52). Being alone, he shows more concerns towards the establishment of a social self in guaranteeing a bright future ahead.

Razumov's Betrayal

A discussion on Razumov's rationale in betraying Haldin is helpful in contrasting the difference in his mentality after his departure from Russia. In paving the way for Razumov's betrayal, Conrad inserts a scene to demonstrate how the incapability of eliminating any potential threats to his safety can enrage this student. With "the desperate desire to get rid of [Haldin's] presence", Razumov looks for Ziemianitch, a man who keep sledges and horses, and also Haldin's sole hope for escaping from his critical stage (*UWE* 2007, 25). Upon realizing that Ziemianitch is drunk and rather incapable to assist Haldin with the plan to escape in the present condition, he behaves like a wild beast facing its rival:

He looked round wildly, seized the handle of a broken stable-fork and rushing forward, struck at the prostrate body with inarticulate cries. After a time his cries ceased, and the rain of blows fell in the stillness and shadows of the cellar-like stable (*UWE* 2007, 27).

Almost immediately after imposing physical abuse upon Ziemianitch, Razumov experiences a brief period of mental serenity. Still, he hasn't forgotten that the crisis has not been solved, and "he was conscious now of a tranquil, unquenchable hate" (*UWE* 2007, 29). One must remember that it has never been Razumov's wish in offering help to Haldin, a dangerous student from his perspective and that of the despotic government. When Haldin comes to Razumov's apartment unwelcomely with his philosophy, "Razumov wondered why he had not cut short that talk and told this man to go away long before" (*UWE* 2007, 19). Then, Razumov immediately imagines his downfall and sentence. His hatred towards Haldin grows and this foreshadows his betrayal of this man who addresses him as "brother" (*UWE* 2007, 22).

Watts expresses the point of view that "Razumov contrives a philosophical and political rationale for lethal treachery" (Watts 2009, 37). In the early parts of the novel, Razumov's philosophical and political rationale seemingly lies in his autocratic belief that "absolute power must be preserved" (*UWE* 2007, 32). As Razumov ponders his next move, he decides that "Haldin means disruption" because "revolution makes people become disintegrated mass" (*UWE* 2007, 31). Therefore, it is necessary to betray Haldin for the safety of the country. The choice of the Russian setting in St. Petersburg helps to reinforce the idea of aligning Razumov's behavior with autocratic ideology:

Razumov's Russia is a space hostile to change and to the dispersing of new ideas: students are considered as especially dangerous. While modernity can be seen to enter Russia in some students' desire for the new, this is not the case for Razumov, who makes his home in tradition (Nyman 2000, 173).

Most importantly, this act of betrayal can keep him, as a subject under the protection of the autocracy of Prince K-, safe. Having understood this underlying aim of self-protection, it is easy to conceive that though Razumov aligns the act of betraying Haldin with the necessity of upholding Russian autocratic ideology. He demonstrates the belief of ego centrality. The self becomes a violent autocrat in response to a powerful underlying shock of Haldin's unexpected visit.

As the title of Watts' essay suggests, Razumov's act of betraying Haldin becomes a phantom that keeps haunting him. The extermination of Haldin's physical self has then been reimagined as various forms of reincarnation. Razumov originally believes that the value of a person's physical existence is connected to the mind. For instance, while he understands the insignificance of Haldin and himself as "grains of sands", he thinks that Haldin is a "withered member which must be cut off" (*UWE* 2007, 32). In other words, Haldin's revolutionary mind gives rise to a dangerous self. Razumov thus shows an indifferent attitude towards the destruction of Haldin and tries to distance his own superior self from him:

If I must perish through him, let me at least not perish with him, and associated against my will with his somber folly that understands nothing, either of men or things. Why should I leave a false memory? (*UWE* 2007, 33).

Although he has successfully prevented himself from being accused of committing the crime of treason, he suffers consequently from a conviction beyond his conscience. The act of betrayal is a conservative conviction that fits the milieu of Russian autocracy and cynicism, but not his conscience. This disastrous outcome that haunts him perpetually has been foreshadowed by his earlier thought

No! If I must suffer let me at least suffer for my convictions, not for a crime my reason – my cool superior reason – rejects (*UWE* 2007, 32).

Prior to his physical disappearance and eventual death, Haldin has prophesized the haunting power of his revolutionary soul:

Haunt it! Truly, oppressors of thought which quickens the world, the destroyers of soul which aspire to perfection of human dignity, they shall be haunted. As to the destroyers of my mere body, I have forgiven them beforehand (*UWE* 2007, 51).

As the haunting effect of Haldin upon Razumov begins, the latter's idealized vision of staying in the comfort zone remains questionable. Both Razumov's ontological safety and mental tranquility are at risk, the idea that he would "remain a political suspect all his days" comes to his mind (*UWE* 2007, 61).

The State of Subsequent Horror

To account for Razumov's confession in the later part of the plot, his state of horror after the act of betrayal has to be discussed. As a continuation of his everlasting quest of safety, it is crucial to distinguish the pain of rage and abhorrence towards Haldin from the impact of terror:

The only difference between pain and terror, is that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting danger [...] (Burke 1958, 132).

It is apparent that the act of betraying Haldin transforms the concern over securing physical safety into psychological horror. In other words, it gives rise to more problems regarding the question of future safety. In justifying his act of betrayal, Razumov previously believes that "[an] act of conscience must be done with outward dignity" (*UWE* 2007, 35). He betrays Haldin out of faithfulness towards

himself. The conversation with a student nicknamed Madcap Kostia reveals that Razumov has been misunderstood by some fellow students as being mysteriously connected to Haldin. This association is then perceived by Razumov as hindering his individual intelligence. It makes Razumov feel that “[h]e lost all hope of saving his future, which depended on the free use of his intelligence” (*UWE* 2007, 71).

There occurs to Razumov a short moment of peace when he learns from Councillor Mikulin that Prince K has made an order to guarantee Razumov’s involvement in reporting Haldin “has been kept out of the documents and even from the knowledge of the judges themselves” (*UWE* 2007, 79). The confirmation of Haldin’s execution and eventual death gives Razumov a feeling that the unwanted encounter is finally over. Indeed, he is suffering from fatigue. The sense of restlessness is stirred up again when Councillor Mikulin told him that Haldin “had a belief in belief a future existence” (*UWE* 2007, 80). This brings Haldin to the recurring motif of haunting. Although Razumov assures his steadfast faith in autocracy by saying that Haldin “is a mere phantom” to him (*UWE* 2007, 81), such statement has ironically affirmed the latter’s prophetic vision that “[t]hey can kill my body, but they cannot exile my soul from this world” (*UWE* 2007, 50). Jennifer Margaret Fraser observes that Razumov’s act reflects “he exhibits his power to himself by walking over the ghost of Haldin, rather than listen to it” (Fraser 2011, 30). In fact, Razumov’s silence and trembling lips after giving the defensive speech in front of Councillor Mikulin confirm Fraser’s suggestion that “Razumov returns to his haunting moment” (Fraser 2011, 36). The haunting experience of mental insecurity persists even after Haldin’s death. This serves as a driving force that explains Razumov’s choice of confession as the plot complicates.

The change of setting in the novel assists our understanding of Razumov’s confession. Making Russia the default setting of the novel sharpens the contrast with the later depiction of the Russian community “La Petite Russie” in Geneva at the first glance. Russia is “where it is not always safe” (*UWE* 2007, 11). To highlight how Russia is perceived under Western eyes, the Englishman narrator has also commented in front of Razumov that “Your Russia *is* a cruel country” (*UWE* 2007, 158). It is exactly under this autocratic circumstance that Razumov aims at protecting his own prospect, the dream of being “a celebrated professor” at all costs (*UWE* 2007, 14). Being away from Russia and residing “in the free, independent and democratic city of Geneva” does not wipe out Razumov’s concern on safety (*UWE* 2007, 91). In examining Razumov identity in relation to the political aspect of the novel, Sarkar regards him as “a political victim without directly participating in politics” (Sarkar 1996, 129). It is true that despite living in “the heart of democracy”, the Russian acquaintances and Razumov’s mandatory stay in Geneva due to his secret mission give him both physical and mental burdens (*UWE* 2007, 170). In short, Razumov’s secret identity in Geneva puts his life at even greater risk.

The Restoration of Personal Integrity

Watts initiates that Razumov confesses “as a means to restore personal integrity” (Watts 2009, 39). This assumption seemingly conflicts with Razumov’s earlier alignment of revolution with disruption. It is crucial to understand that the persistent, haunting image of Haldin has a long-lasting effect upon Razumov. Months after Haldin’s execution, Razumov keeps himself physically safe by telling lies to various people, such as the female revolutionist Sophia Antonovna and Mrs. Haldin. He has been haunted by Haldin’s legacy and revolutionary spirit, as both have already inflicted upon his sphere of acquaintance in Geneva. He feels insecure for “[e]very word uttered by Haldin lived in Razumov’s memory. They were like haunting shapes; they could not be exorcised” (*UWE* 2007, 139). The meeting with the two Haldin women intensifies the haunting effect:

It was the other who had attained to repose and yet continued to exist in the affection of that mourning old woman, in the thoughts of all these people posing for lovers of humanity. It was impossible to get rid of him (*UWE* 2007, 281).

Although the narrator mentions “lucky that he doesn’t believe in another world”, he views Mrs. Haldin as a phantom (*UWE* 2007, 281). Thus, there appears a ridiculing effect regarding Haldin’s misplaced idolatry of Razumov. Haldin is actually described by Nathalie as “a man certain of immortality” (*UWE* 2007, 131). However, Razumov is haunted by Haldin, a man who once worshipped him and is later betrayed by him, in a secular manner.

Watts suggests that the joint forces of guilt and superstition result in the haunting effect. We shall understand “Razumov’s guilty and superstitious imagination” from a dissimilar perspective here (Watts 2009, 42). Though Razumov keeps denying Haldin’s revolutionary ideology, the latter’s execution has a fatal effect over his physical condition and mental state. When being interrogated by the revolutionist Sophia Antonovna, Razumov holds firm the principle regarding “the need of perfect safety” (*UWE* 2007, 231). To ensure this, he conceals his relationship with Haldin and acts in pretense:

Razumov did not mean to speak; he could not have interrupted her now, not to save his life. The contraction of his facial muscles had been involuntarily, a mere surface stir, leaving him sullenly attentive as before (*UWE* 2007, 225).

Razumov shows physical exhaustion in concealing his dark past. This also results in the recurring motif of haunting, as seen from “[t]he ghost of that night pursued him. He stood up to it with rage and with weariness” (*UWE* 2007, 225). Referring to Watts’ perspective on superstition, the case of Razumov is not quite related to the belief of Haldin’s reincarnation, but how he superstitiously prioritizes the belief in guarding his own safety at the expense of mental tranquility.

It is through Miss Haldin that Razumov shows a sense of guilt. She reminds him of “the unpardonable sin of stealing a soul” (*UWE* 2007, 296). It is through loving her that he has been inflicted by her revolutionary spirit, from which he realizes his guilt and the haunting legacy of Haldin. Ironically, Razumov has been romantically attracted by a female version of the man whom he murders and victimizes. This proves that he betrays his own conscience. Alex Houen studies Conrad’s essay “Autocracy and War” (1905) and summarizes Conrad’s perception that “the crisis faced by Europe as a whole is not related to the spectacle of Russian terrorism, but rather to the seemingly indefatigable spirit of its autocracy” (Houen 2002, 67). Conrad’s political viewpoint is also made clear by means of Razumov’s confession. In Razumov’s letter of confession to Miss Haldin, he stated clearly that it was himself that he had betrayed basely (*UWE* 2007, 298). In order to give himself a sense of false security, he puts his conscience aside and breaks fraternal trust. He has repressed the self in the name of national stability. This verifies Watts’ statement that confession is a means to restore Razumov’s integrity.

Watts thinks the novel gives a secular emphasis on Razumov’s disillusionment and that he uses confession to withdraw from struggle (Watts 2009, 39). It is actually the disillusionment of false security, putting one from a safe state to a threatening condition, which gives rise to the confession for ontological certainty. Razumov initially views Prince K as patriarchal authority and Russia as his cradle (*UWE* 2007, 210). Being sent by Prince K to Geneva for the secret and dangerous mission, he still believes that it is safe in dealing with revolutionaries as “they no longer care about anything in the world” (*UWE* 2007, 262). However, the haunting effect of Haldin leaves him with no peace. He then decides that ultimate safety at both the ontological and mental levels can be achieved by making a confession, not just to Miss Haldin, but also in front of the revolutionists:

[...] To-day, of all days since I came amongst you, I was made safe, and to-day I made myself free from falsehood, from remorse – independent of every single human being on this earth (*UWE* 2007, 303).

Through gaining self-autonomy, Razumov achieves ultimate safety. He mentions that “[t]he only thing needed to make me safe – a trusted revolutionist for ever” (*UWE* 2007, 296). He then achieves this by turning himself into such a trusted revolutionist. He has become a deaf man as his punishment for having committed a crime. Deafening carries the implication as a symbolic manifestation of internal refusal, since he refuses to listen to Haldin. This ideology echoes with his pursuit of personal integrity, and meanwhile, fulfills his inner desire to be a revolutionist, instead of an obedient spy. His change of attitude makes Haldin’s “prophecy” comes true, that “[his] spirit shall go on warring in some Russian body till all falsehood is swept out of the world” (*UWE* 2007, 21).

Conclusion

Through the characterization of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad attempted to address to questions related the ontological safety and mental tranquility under a restrictive political environment of government surveillance and bureaucratic social context. With reference to C.T. Watts' article "*Under Western Eyes: The Haunted Haunts*", this paper examines the reasons behind Razumov's original idea of viewing Haldin as a robber who robbed him of his hard work. Razumov's purposeful existence as an individual under the State is related to his concerns over future career and personal success (*UWE* 2007, 295).

Razumov soon finds out how reporting Haldin's revolutionary act only gives him a haunted life. His pursuits of reputation and physical safety are turned into threats of mental burdens. After Haldin's execution, Razumov's encounters outside the Russian borders become unavoidably connected to the former's revolutionary ideology and sphere of acquaintance. Razumov is even attracted by Haldin's sister, Nathalie. Paradoxically, it is Razumov's confession and the self-imposed punishment of having a wounded body that keep him safe from suffering further from either physical or psychological tortures. That he performs out of the sense of achieving integrity brings him a peaceful mind. The novel thus expresses the idea on the importance of erasing established ideology, both in terms of nationhood and one's old self.

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REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST: DICKENSIAN ORPHANHOOD AS A METAPHOR OF BRITISH COLONIALISM IN RICHARD FLANAGAN'S *WANTING*



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Abstract

During the process of colonial expansion and conquering new territories together with their people, the British Empire never took full responsibility for the citizens of its new overseas possessions. By forcing the colonised nations to accept European standards, British colonialism aimed at expunging their indigenous traditions in a process of acculturation. If colonial power dynamics can be metaphorically seen as parent-child relations, the dissemination of racist ideas eulogising the superior value of the white man over the colonised Other exposes British colonial parenthood as a fiasco. In this paper I will discuss Richard Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2008), presenting it as an illustration of the Empire's lack of responsibility towards its overseas progeny. I will use the Dickensian motif of orphanhood which, when transferred into a colonial reality, can be construed as a metaphor of the colonial condition of the subaltern exploited by British hegemony. I will present the orphaned Aboriginal girl Mathinna who is separated from her community and coercively subjected to the social process of acculturation. In Homi Bhabha's terms, by adapting the coloniser's culture, Mathinna emerges as a hybrid, who, by mimicking the hegemonic culture, becomes a threat to the certitude of the colonial authority. In the end she is without any protective affiliation and abandoned by her adoptive parents, and thus falls into the pattern of the orphan as depicted in Dickens's fiction.

Key words

Orphanhood, Post-colonial, Richard Flanagan, *Wanting*, Mathinna, Charles Dickens, the Franklins

The colonial mechanism of conquering new territories by the British Empire not only substantially contributed to the economic growth of its centre, but also meant that the colonised societies literally became its citizens. One of the ways to read power dynamics between the colonisers and the colonised is to view them in terms of parent-child relations. By adopting imperial culture, religion and language, the colonised seemed literally to be assimilated by the Empire, figuratively becoming its

offspring in the processes of acculturation. Poor economic and technological development made the colonised communities be seen “as children, as men not fully grown, whose destiny had to be guided by the presumably more advanced states of Europe” (Cohen 1970, 427). In this way, the conquering European empires figuratively assumed the role of a parent responsible for the upbringing process of their children whose maturity could only be attained thanks to the intervention of the Western civilisation. Yet, the consequences of European “parenthood” were disastrous not only economically but also physically and emotionally, resulting in privation, commercial inequity, spread of diseases, loss of land, national identities and indigenous cultures. In cultural terms, orphanhood can be read as a manner of representation and as a metaphor of the colonial condition of those marginalised and unwanted by their new “mother” countries.

A metaphorical understanding of the British Empire as motherland, “Mother Country,” indicates a sense of belonging of the subjugated peoples to the Empire and their dependence on its economy and ideology for their survival and well-being. The feminisation of the British Empire derives from the psychological meaning of the word because a mother has traditionally been seen as responsible for her children’s emotional and intellectual development, protection, but also supervision. It seems to be coherent with the Victorian stereotype of the “Perfect Lady” who was responsible for “uniting and morally regenerating the country around the ideology of motherhood, the sexual restraint and moral order of which was believed to have immunised the country from overwhelming civil strife” (Alessio 1997, 241-242). However, the image of the “Perfect Lady” can be understood in a broader context. If “she” was supposed to “ensure the stability of the nation and the continued strength of its industrial and military might” (1997, 242), the “Perfect Lady” can also stand for “Mother Britain” whose imperial activity aimed at maintaining a similar stability among “her” new colonial offspring and military strength in the conquered areas.

Commenting on “a less male-centered, and more domestically orientated” rhetoric of imperialism in Victorian and Edwardian periods, the British dominions were described “as ‘sister nations’ or ‘daughter dominions’ of the ‘mother country,’ which, with the help of their ‘parent,’ had grown up from ‘childhood’ through ‘adolescence’ to the ‘maturity’ of self-government” (Thompson 1997, 175). Mridula Chauhan uses a similar metaphor, stating that child upbringing “is done by the mother with her full devotion, similarly to the land as a mother offers its inhabitants everything required for their growth and maintenance” (2012, 1376). By assimilating the overseas territories, the Empire became a new “adoptive” mother for the indigenous people inhabiting them.

As has been indicated, the acculturation process of the natives in British colonies involved the replacement of indigenous lifestyle with the Empire. The educational system in colonised territories was based on English literature

considered an ally “to support [colonial administrators] in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education” (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 3). Its consequences can be noticed in the burgeoning tendency of postcolonial writers to revert in their fiction to literary texts of the source, Mother Britain, the canonical texts of British literature which formed the basis of their colonial education, and use them as points of reference and intertextual groundwork for their contemporary, often Neo-Victorian, literature.

Charles Dickens seems to be an author whose oeuvre and controversial life episodes have been of particular interest to many postcolonial writers and film producers. “Imperial” reading of Dickens’s marginal comments on British colonies can be seen as one of the possible interpretations of the postcolonial “absorption” in the Dickensian world. The fascination with Dickens is also likely to stem from the presumption that the writer “has been particularly well suited to portraying the fantastic incongruities of colonial and postcolonial life” (Jordan 2008, 498). In a similar vein, John Thieme argues that postcolonial writers find it “easier to identify with the cultural and social politics of [Dickens’s] reformist fiction than the work of many of his more middle-class contemporaries” (2001, 103). For postcolonial writers, Dickens seems to occupy “a central role in the canon and as an outsider who could be a trenchant critic of the dominant social codes of his day” (Thieme 2001, 102). According to Catherine Lanone, as the embodiment of England and Englishness, Dickens seems to bring “Britain to distant readers and [arouses] in them the desire to become a writer too” (2012, 20). It can be noticed in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1988) by V. S. Naipaul, where the narrator develops his vision of London through a lens of Dickens’s novels: “The London I knew or imaginatively possessed was the London I had got from Dickens. It was Dickens – and his illustrators – who gave me the illusion of knowing the city” (1988, 133).

A motif of orphanhood is closely associated with Dickens for many reasons. The orphaned children in his fiction were depicted in the context of his criticism of child neglect, child labour, marginalisation of the poor, workhouses and the Poor Laws of 1834 as evidenced in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1852), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Great Expectations* (1861). By lambasting the gross misdeeds of Victorian society through the prism of its weakest members, children and orphans, Dickens seemed to affect the society’s sentiment and thereby establish his position as a sensitive and moralistic writer. Orphanhood, or, to be more precise, emotional orphanhood is also strongly attached to Dickens’s own traumatic childhood. At the age of twelve, he became a sole breadwinner of his family when he had to stick labels on the bottles of shoe polish at Warren’s Blacking Factory after his father had been incarcerated for debts. Peter Ackroyd states that Dickens’s childhood “ended so suddenly that it did not gradually fade and disappear as most childhoods do” (1991, 73). In this respect, Dickens’s own

orphanhood can be read as a sense of spiritual abandonment by his parents and a loss of parental care. Not only did the experience have a long-time effect on his later life when he strived to form emotional and financial security, but it also impinged upon his fiction which reveals him as empathetic especially towards orphaned and abandoned children.

Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) is a post-colonial novel set in the Victorian period and composed of two intertwined stories. The first story centers on the life of Charles Dickens and starts in 1951 when he learns about the death of his infant daughter Dora. It is also a moment when Lady Jane Franklin, at this point in the narrative, a widow by the famous explorer of the Arctic, visits Dickens in 1854 to ask him to defend her husband against speculations that, after failing to reach the Northwest Passage, Franklin and his crew have committed cannibalistic acts in order to survive. The other story, takes place before Sir John's expedition. It presents a history of Mathinna, an Aboriginal orphan girl adopted by Sir John Franklin, a governor of Van Diemen's Land (officially Tasmania since 1856), and Lady Jane Franklin who arrive at Aboriginal camp at Wybalenna. The Franklins, especially Lady Jane, want to transform Mathinna into a "civilised" person. I suggest that the process of Mathinna's cultural denigration by the representatives of the Western culture emerges as a reflection of the imperial ideology stressing white race supremacy.

From a critical perspective, Bożena Kucała notes that *Wanting* demonstrates the inner split of two reputable Englishmen: Charles Dickens and Sir John Franklin, that is to say, their difficulty in reconciling the Victorian morals with their inner dark yearnings. The critic aptly states that the Victorians and Dickens are shown in the novel as "driven by conflicting impulses [...] failing to achieve a balance between social respectability and personal fulfilment. As a result, they appear misguided and lost rather than intentionally hypocritical" (2019, 163). Focusing on the theme of cannibalism in the novel, Tammy Ho Lai-Ming acutely underlines the fact that "Flanagan's evocation of cannibalism [is] to comment on and critique the British Empire's treatment and exploitation of the land and its people" (2012, 14). Sahlia Ben-Messahel, on the other hand, states that Flanagan "reconfigures and renames history by exposing the wanting elements in colonial discourse" (2013, 21), pointing out "the fallacies of rationalism and utopianism in colonial times" (2013, 22). Under that reasoning, Kerstin Knopf also underlines the colonial dystopia and the unwarranted conviction of the Western hegemony, principally evident in the scientific experiments conducted on the natives, which was also accentuated in *Wanting*. For Knopf, Flanagan explicitly undermines the "scientific racism" of the Western nations, exposing "such studies [phrenology, craniometry, anthropometry] as unfounded pseudoscientific experiments that were conducted in the name of Western cultural supremacy" (2015, 97). Margaret Harris remarks that "history is not the subject of

Wanting” (2018, 137). The novel emerges as “the moral drama played out in a particular set of historical contexts” (2018, 137) or, as Larissa McLean Davies says: “a meditation on desire, that explores the notion that life is finally determined never by reason, but only ever by wanting” (2011, 137).

I am going to focus on Mathinna’s story, where her orphanhood can be read as a metaphor of the colonial mechanism in the nineteenth century, or, as Bożen Kucała defines: Flanagan constructs “a tale of a child (comparable with Dickens’s portrayals) coupled with victimisation through imperialist cultural arrogance” (2019, 165). Western arrogance towards the indigenes inhabiting Australia, and Van Diemen’s Land seems to be intensified by the fact that, from the geographical perspective, this remote part of the globe was considered “the end of the world if something else – probably: Europe – is its origin” (Crane 2019, 158). In this sense Aboriginal population, sequestered from the civilised world and treated as its absolute countertype, was viewed as subhuman and imbued with wilderness that had to be uprooted. In the novel this attitude is reflected in Mathinna’s strict acculturation process aimed at eradicating “other imaginations of the world, other understandings or epistemologies” (2019, 158). By foregrounding the destructive dominion of a white man who stands for “a culture that was confident of its own superior ‘civilised’ status” (Montero and Kelly 2016, 85) over the Aboriginal community, Flanagan’s novel emerges as a graphic account of the Van Diemen’s Land Aborigines shaped by privileged British elites and their ideologies:

The repertoire of white discourses of race relations encompassed: Romanticism and the idea of the ‘Noble savage’, Aboriginal people as vermin, Social Darwinism, doomed race theories, protection, the ‘civilizing mission’, assimilation, self-determination and reconciliation (Elder 2009, 20-21).

These ideas bring the white discourse to the forefront in establishing social structure in Australia and Van Diemen’s Land, diminishing the importance of the non-whites and stigmatising them, which is explicitly depicted in *Wanting*. Orphanhood, or “the juxtaposition of innocence and vulnerability [which] [...] exercised a particular fascination for Dickens” (Tomalin 2012, 47) was used by him to portray victims of gross deficiencies of social British system. Flanagan uses the same metaphor of orphanhood and his depiction of the orphaned, physically and psychologically displaced Aboriginal girl subjected to the process of cultural denigration, serves as a representation of all victims of British colonial exploitation. It can be said that Mathinna becomes a representative of the colonised and discriminated peoples who were never treated as fully-fledged “children” of Mother Britain.

Commenting on the origin of the novel, Ron Charles explains that as a young Flanagan visited the Hobart Museum and noticed “a watercolour of a child in a pretty red dress” which became the inspiration for the novel. It depicted Mathinna, the

Aboriginal girl adopted by the Franklins with a view to being transformed from a “savage” into a civilised person. Thomas Bock, an English-Australian artist sentenced to transportation to Australia, on commission of Lady Jane Franklin, painted Mathinna and portraits of other Tasmanian Aborigines. The frames of the painting intently hid the bare, black feet of the girl in order to cover up any vestiges of her link with the Aboriginal community, and focus on the beginning of the cultural assimilation, which bespeaks the fate of the orphans of colonialism deprived of their land, relatives and identity.¹ When first met, Mathinna is seven years old and lives on Flinders Island, Wybalenna, a territory where the remaining Aborigines from Van Diemen’s Land are pressurised by the British to resettle to a colony based on European standards. From the very beginning of the novel, Flanagan exposes what the noble notion of bringing the light of civilisation really means, showing the disastrous outcome of a clash of two cultures. Despite his ardent efforts to be the saviour of the savages, the Protector of the island, Augustus Robinson, feels that the people “whom he had brought to God’s light were yet dying in some strange way, in consequence of him,” and is confident that “this rotting stench [of the dead bodies] related to him, to his actions, his beliefs” (Flanagan 2016, 11). In such situations, the Protector resorts to the power of words and endeavours to search for the most appropriate ones “that might act as a covering strip for some inexplicable yet shameful error. But words only amplified the darkness he felt” (2016, 13). Kerstin Knopf notes that “Robinsons’ inability to recount and explain the deaths of the Natives here participates in the British Empire’s discursive erasure of such dreadful facts” (2015, 96). Abandoned by authorities and isolated from the outside world, Robinson knows that no matter how hard he tries, the colony he is in charge of is a pathetic imitation of England. The recurring feeling of entrapment and loneliness harasses him. Natives on the island keep dying and Robinson, aware of the failure of his noble mission, begins to long for “their dances and songs, the beauty of their villages, the sound of their rivers, the memory of their tenderness” (Flanagan 2016, 19). His colonial life “surrounded by corpses, skulls, autopsy reports, plans for the chapel and cemetery” (2016, 19) – which directly refers to the scientific racism being part and parcel of colonial practices – has become too overwhelming. The Protector wants to be unchained from British society who “all practiced closing down

¹ It echoes the fates of the orphans of the Stolen Generation, a phrase used to refer to indigenous children of Australia and Canada, forcibly taken from their parents to be adapted to the white community. In Australia, between 1910 and 1970, the scheme was aimed at children born from a relationship of Aboriginal woman and a white man. According to the originator of the idea, A. O. Neville, those children had to be biologically absorbed to white society to “breed out the [black] color” (Knightley 2001) whereas the pure-blood Aboriginal children were believed to vanish. In Canada, Aboriginal children of Indian and Eskimo (Inuit) origin were put in residential schools whose main objective was to “uproot [the children] from [their] former ‘inferior’ cultures” (Carpenter 2017) in the process of Christianisation and Europeanisation. Mathinna’s cultural assimilation alludes more at the Canadian pattern of deracination because of her full-blood Aboriginal origin.

themselves and everything around” (Flanagan 2016, 61). Convinced by the natives, the Protector takes off his clothes, allowing his body to be involved in a lascivious dance.

He was momentarily beset by the terrifying idea that this was what he truly desired in life. Naked, he found himself leaping, stamping, flying, lost in a strange abandon beneath the southern lights. Was this his true reward, rather than the money he would be given if he brought all the natives in? (2016, 60).

The last sentence reveals Robinson’s real reason for his civilising mission of the indigenous community. Behind the veneer of the “saviour” (Flanagan 2016, 11) of Van Diemonian Aborigines, there is a money-oriented lackey of the Empire. At the same time, this telling episode calls into question Robinson’s coloniser’s identity and dignity. Giving himself up to the momentary bodily ecstasy, he discovers “ideation that unduly inhabits his imagination” (Deyo 2013, 103) which for a moment is capable of obviating the imperatives of his race, reason and Christianity.

When the Governor, Sir John Franklin, and his wife Lady Jane arrive in Wybalenna in order to inspect the fruit of bringing civilisation to this remote corner of the Empire, the couple decide to adopt Mathinna since, as Sir John nobly declares, “if we shine the Divine light on lost souls, then they can be no less than we. But first they must be taken out of the darkness and its barbarous influence” (Flanagan 2016, 69). Although Mathinna belongs to the so-called “dying race” and is prone to exhibit her wildness, she retains self-possession almost equal to the British while watching her father’s death. Robinson takes delight in his civilising work when he observes Mathinna’s silence and gravity sitting by King Romeo’s body. This situation makes the Protector believe that “she might be more amenable to a civilising influence” (2016, 18). Mathinna’s orphanhood after she loses her father in dramatic circumstances seems a pivotal “precondition for narrative development [where] the protagonist [assumes] the role of the hero” (Bainbridge 2010, 9). Yet, it may also mean that assuming the role of a hero after the death of her father will entail her acknowledgement or acceptance of suffering a similarly tragic fate, or even a premature death largely caused by the presence of colonists.

Mathinna’s orphanhood has double meaning: she is literally being orphaned after the loss of her parents but also her ties with her Aboriginal tribe are brutally cut, which shows that her identity is undermined by the representatives of the British Empire. Mathinna’s resistance to be taken to the Franklins’ crumbling Government House in Hobart Town, manifested in her crying, disappearances and escapes, is finally suppressed by Robinson. A ring-tailed albino opossum, tamed by Mathinna at the camp, accompanies her during the journey to the Franklins’ house. The opossum seems to be her only ties with her past and the only companion of her plight. Flanagan’s choice of the animal is not accidental – its prevalent white colour dominates over the darkness of her skin. Its immaculate whiteness corresponds with

the whiteness of the skin of the colonisers, with the assumed immaculateness of their moral standards, purity of their intentions. Ironically, however, it becomes a perverse symbol of the subordination of Aborigines to British authority, and becomes a herald of Mathinna's clash with the "civilising light" of the Franklins.

Upon arrival, the girl is instantly subjected to the civilising process which "is marked by her subsequent acculturation and fall" (Ben-Messahel 2013, 25). Lady Jane, Mathinna's educator is a staunch proponent of the Evangelical principle in relation to education. She states that "The distance between savagery and civilization is measured by our control of our basest instincts. And the road travelled to civilization is, I intend to show, enlightened education" (Flanagan 2016, 126). The woman is portrayed by Flanagan as an iron-willed and fanatic person, whose craving for domination and fierce determination become the real reason for Mathinna's inevitable demise. It must be noted that Evangelicalism promoted a particularly harsh code of children's upbringing, "the Evangelical's anxious eye was forever fixed upon the 'eternal microscope' which searched for every moral blemish and reported every motion of the soul" (Altick 1973, 188).

It is noteworthy that in his novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, where the Evangelical doctrine is pursued for the sake of orphaned children, Dickens vehemently reprobated this pedagogy. It is especially evident in *David Copperfield* when the dictatorial Murdstone siblings do their best to tame David's "undisciplined heart", which is manifested in Mr Murdstone's ill-treatment and even beating of the boy. In Flanagan's *Wanting*, Mathinna's "undisciplined heart" is supposed to be quelled by the endeavours of Lady Jane Franklin, for whom diligence, intellectual discipline and moral upbringing are supposed to suppress the girl's cravings.

Lady Jane's authoritative stance towards Mathinna can be read in terms of Bhabha's ambivalence of the colonial stereotype. The fixity of the stereotype aims at confirming the confidence that the colonised are supposed to be seen as the Other that are in opposition to colonisers' culture. The stereotype is to help the colonisers to tame the Otherness of the conquered peoples (Branach-Kallas 2022, 25). Driven by racial bias, Lady Jane categorises the girl in terms of inferiority, savagery and dirtiness. Thus her strict and principled approach towards Mathinna allows her to suppress the feeling of fear and uncertainty that the colonised could appear more human while, paradoxically, the coloniser could become more foreign (2022, 25), which can be applied to Lady Jane. The ambivalence of the stereotype causes the coloniser's anxiety and identity crisis, "[t]he stereotype produces on the part of the colonizer both power and pleasure and also anxiety and defensiveness" (McRobbie 2005, 110). The stereotype always carries the burden of "*both* an aggressive expression of domination over the other *and* evidence of narcissistic anxiety about the self" (Huddart 2006, 29). From Bhabha's standpoint, the coloniser's narcissistic feeling of

superiority that “reminds [him] of his inherent difference from [the Other]” is threatened by “his aggressivity [that] masks this difference in terms of the politics of identity with the colonized” (Chakrabarti 2012, 11). Lady Jane’s behavior seems to be in line with the concept of ambivalence because her unremitting authoritative stance can be read as a latent anxiety about being tainted by the culture of the Other, and consequently losing her Self and her dominance over the girl. As David Huddart says, Bhabha puts emphasis on “unexpected anxieties that plagued the colonizer despite his apparent mastery” (2006, 5). In a similar vein, Brett C. Mcinelly reads Robinson Crusoe’s encounter with Friday, when the white man, to master his fear of the Other, has to master the Other (2003, 18). Crusoe is able to preserve his authority by “[composing] himself as ‘master,’ in control of himself as well as the native Other” (McInelly 2003, 18). A parallel conjuncture seems to be reflected in *Wanting*, when Lady Jane, by repressing her own “undisciplined heart” and the unsettling feeling to develop a parental relationship with Mathinna, is able to control herself and the Other.

McInelly’s reading of the relationship between Crusoe and Friday in terms of Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry and ambivalence can also be addressed to Lady Jane-Mathinna relationship. Even if Mathinna tried hard to imitate British culture, she would invariably be seen as the Other. Such ambivalence of Bhabha’s colonial mimicry results in Mathinna’s – the colonised subject – “partial presence”, which also “produces a fragmentary vision of the colonist’s own identity” (McInelly 2003, 17). In other words, Mathinna is unable to recreate a faithful reflection of the coloniser, the Franklins, simultaneously disfiguring their fixed “self-image by casting back an unfamiliar and, at times, unidentifiable image” (McInelly 2003, 17). Commenting on Lacan’s “technique of camouflage” (Bhabha 1994, 85) as a metonym of mimicry, Bhabha considers it implicit in colonial discourse – “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (1994, 90). Reflecting the notion of colonial mimicry, Mathinna also “revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history” imposed by the British hegemony, “[rearticulating] presence in terms of [her] ‘otherness’” (Bhabha 1994, 91). In this respect, the Franklins’ “desire for mimicry” (Chakrabarti 2012, 15), that is to say, their desire to civilise the girl, seems to be subverted, becoming the girl’s share. In other words, from disadvantageous, Mathinna’s position changes into the threatening one. From Bhabha’s standpoint, mimicry is an integral part of colonial hegemony, but it also carries the “menace” of disruption of colonial authority. This conjuncture seems to echo in *Wanting*. The experiment of civilising the Aboriginal girl does not only turn out to be disastrous for Mathinna, but also for the Franklins. Both Van Diemen’s Land supposed to be the imitation of England and Mathinna intended to mimic its culture overwhelm the Franklins who leave the island

defended. The both lose their authoritative stance: Sir John Franklin can no longer bear office of a governor because he is not able to deal with the matters on the island whereas Lady Jane leaves not as Mathinna's mother, but merely as the girl's foster guardian.

The Franklins' attempts to culturally assimilate Mathinna can also be interpreted through the lens of the colonised subject whose identity is split. Mathinna embodies Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" because she appears to inhabit a space in-between, she is drawn to the memory of her indigenous culture and wants to mimic the culture of the colonisers. If read as a hybrid of two cultures, Mathinna emblematically represents a threat to the notion of "the inherent purity of cultures" (Bhabha 1994, 58) and the unquestionable originality of the stereotype in the colonial discourse. The existence of cultural hybrids questions cultural homogeneity because "the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated" (1994, 114). Mathinna directly threatens the notion of binary oppositions between the Western and non-Western worlds "[breaking] down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside" (Bhabha 1994, 116).

In the course of the novel, Sir John Franklin desires the child's warmth and touch, but his communion with Mathinna awakes his hidden instincts, especially when the girl performs the dance of a black swan. The swan provides a symbolic connection between Aboriginal and European worlds. For Aboriginal people of Van Diemen's Land black swans were their staple food, for Europeans a swan is a symbol of rareness rather than an element of diet. The narrator refers also to its meaning in mythology: Zeus takes the form of a swan to seduce and possess a young woman called Leda, which is Mathinna's given name. The costume of a black swan that Sir John wears at the fancy dress party on the expedition ships "Erebus" and "Terror" epitomises his indomitable desire to possess Mathinna, the climax of which takes place when Mathinna passes out after her uncontrolled dance in front of the guests. Sir John, placing the half-conscious girl on a cabin bed and "looking down on Mathinna, her diminutive body, her exposed black ankles, her dirty little feet, the suggestive valley of her red dress between her thin legs, [he] felt thrilled", and after venting his revolting yearning, he "was thrilled no more" (Flanagan 2016, 152). It seems that this unspeakable act of violence he commits overtly refers to Kurtz's "unspeakable rites" in Conrad's novella, which, in a wider scope, exposes the truth about barbarity of white colonisers.

Unable to civilise the Aboriginal child, Lady Jane sends Mathinna to revolting St John's orphanage in Hobart Town. Flanagan's account of the conditions in the orphanage and the state of its abused children reflects Dickens's depiction of wronged children living in similarly deplorable conditions in the heart of the Empire. In his biography of Dickens, Ackroyd maintains that, in Victorian period, these

children were victims of the so called “baby farming.” It meant that “the parish and local authorities gave the orphaned or the abandoned into the care of minders who were paid a certain amount each week per head of child,” which Dickens termed simply “a trade” (Ackroyd 1991, 586). The novelist openly called for the improvement the dire living conditions in workhouses and asylums for pauper children, objecting to “the systematic starvation and mistreatment of children who were emaciated, covered in boils, unable to eat, and who ran the risk of being horse-whipped if they complained of their treatment” (1991, 586). By means of exposing and bringing to light in his novels the fate of children, and especially orphans, Dickens censured the deficiencies of Victorian social system and indifference of society. The same inhumane system is duplicated in British colonial territories. In fact, Flanagan’s depiction of St John’s orphanage in Hobart Town is analogous to the institutions in Victorian England so vividly delineated by Dickens, especially in *Oliver Twist*:

The children slunk away from lady Jane like animals, one part fearful and two parts desperate for food and life; Their faces were subdued and empty, their skin chapped and often scabby, their expressions expressionless. The children seemed too exhausted to do much more than cough and hack and scratch, beset with everything from consumption to chilblains, the tormented wounds of which scabbed their arms with bloodied buttercups (1994, 190-191).

Lady Jane’s visit to the orphanage becomes a turning point in the novel which exposes the real effects of attempts to enlighten this and other Aboriginal children. Despite seeing Mathinna, “already scabby, shaven-headed in a drab cassock who sat alone and unmoving in the dirt below” (Flanagan 2016, 192), Lady Jane manages to tame her own “undisciplined heart” which still possesses vestiges of affection and compassion towards the protégé, understanding that her experiment turns out to be an ignominious defeat – Mathinna returns to her primal roots. Driven by her imperial superiority and lack of conscience, Lady Franklin abandons the idea of taking the girl back home, which becomes the beginning of her decline. From a witty and charming child, Mathinna changes into an alcoholic prostitute who ends up in the Aboriginal community at Oyster Cove, being brutally raped and killed by her corrupted companion, Walter Talba Bruney.

The back of [her] body, ragged clothes partly torn away, was crawling with so many lice it more resembled an insect nest than a human being. Several bloody holes gored the exposed flesh where forest ravens had eaten, their unreadable footprints in the mud around (2016, 250).

In *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire*, Laura Peters provides a riveting study of the significant role the orphan played in Victorian

culture and mind-set. For the burgeoning middle-class, the family was of great value and the orphan figure was seen in binary representations: as a poison since the orphan “embodied the loss of family”, a disturbance “[of] the structure of home, identity, nation and discourse” (2000, 19) and a promise because the orphan enabled the family to “[reaffirm] itself through the expulsion of this threatening difference” (2000, 2). This twofold reading of the orphan in Victorian period seems to be transferred into socio-political sphere. The state considered the orphaned children as a threat to the society because they were supposedly most likely to become paupers and criminals. Thus, to prevent it, the Board of Guardians and the prisonlike workhouses, as evidenced in *Oliver Twist*, were established as the supervisory institutions aimed at ensuring that the orphans would be given due upbringing and education (Peters 2000, 9-10). It also generated hope because the poor orphans (residing in the workhouses) could be shaped by the state and become “both obedient citizens and a constant supply of respectable and dutiful servants” of the country (2000, 8). If seen as “inferior” subjects without rights, coercively subjugated to and shaped by the country that took the role of a parent, in a colonial context, Victorian orphans can be viewed as a metaphorical reflection of a parallel insight into the indigenes in the Empire’s overseas territories. As has been said, the discriminatory dogma created the false portrait of the non-white Other who was forced to be taken under the “parental” care of the Western civilisation, and subsequently re-formed in the process of cultural assimilation to serve the white man. It can be said that the Other seemed to elicit a similar ambivalence of threat and promise as the Victorian orphan. In Bhabha’s words, the Other seemed to be a threat to the pure originality of the colonial stereotype by the articulation of the difference of “race, colour and culture”, which was tantamount to the Other being visible. The colonial discourse strived for the purity of the stereotype and rejected any possible divisions to reaffirm its colonial authority. In addition to this, the culture of the Other embodied “the threat of chaos” (Bhabha 1994, 133) that had to be prevented “by those [promising] moralistic and normative ideologies of amelioration as the Civilizing Mission or the White Man’s Burden” (1994, 83). This metaphorical conflation of the domestic orphans and the natives requires an emphatic predication – in both cases, the Empire failed as a parent. It seems to be reflected in *Wanting*, where the Franklins’ failure to fulfill their parental duties towards Mathinna, make them the exact manifestation of the imperial ideology intended for spreading a protective umbrella of parenthood over the ‘uncivilised’ world. Mathinna becomes an embodiment of colonial orphanhood. Devoid of homeland and brutally cut off from her roots, she is removed from colonial history, unworthy of being remembered. The girl symbolises “the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the unhomed” (Tyson 2006, 428), that is to say, the Aboriginal colonial condition.

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GENDER IDENTITY IN TRANSLATION: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSPOSING NON-BINARY CHARACTERS INTO ROMANIAN



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Abstract

The created world of Ada Palmer's *Terra Ignota* series depicts a future society where gender identity has undergone a process of uniformisation, resulting in the erasure of gendered language. The novels take the form of a confessional (a recounting of the events of the past) which are published in the future society without the express consent of the other characters taking part in the depicted course of events. The narrator, in a motivated show of rebellion against their society's current ideology (discussed both at the beginning of the series and as they progress with the narration), reinscribes gendered pronouns onto the unknowing characters; however, this is done on an arbitrary basis, which the narrator does not always discuss. The present paper aims to emphasize the growing number of LGBTQ+ novels published and the impossibility of transposing them into Romanian due to the lack of a gender-neutral pronoun that does not default to the masculine. The paper analyses *Too Like the Lightning* by Ada Palmer in order to specify the various nuances that would be lost in the cultural adaptation and translation of the novel into Romanian, a translation which has yet to occur, given the complexity and constraints of the novel and the depicted ideology behind it.

Key words

LGBTQ+, queer, translation, LGBTQ+ translation, gender-neutral in translation, cultural translation

Introduction: Gender, translation, and the society of the future

Romanian is viewed as a three-gender Romance language, with its grammatical gender split into feminine, masculine, and neuter, all accompanied by syntactic agreement. These syntactic agreements present in the singular and plural forms as such: (for feminine: weird girl [fată *ciudată*], weird girls [fete *ciudate*]; for masculine: weird boy [băiat *ciudat*], weird boys [băieți *ciudați*], and for the neuter gender, which only distinguishes itself as neuter in the plural form: weird accent [accent (M) *ciudat* (M)], weird accents [accents (F) *ciudate* (F)] (Dinu et al. 2012, 120).

The same issue is illustrated by Croitor and Giurgea in their paper, “On the so-called Romanian ‘neuter’”, wherein they discuss the lack of a distinctive neuter gender marker in syntactic agreement and thus concluding that the feminine plural form for neuter agreement in adjectives is merely a “morphological default” which does not take into consideration gender (37).

Romanian has three nominal agreement classes, but only a binary gender opposition between masculine and feminine on targets of agreement (adjectives, participles, determiners and other nominal functional items) and pronouns. The three nominal agreement classes are masculine, feminine and the so-called “neuter”, which triggers masculine agreement in the singular and feminine agreement in the plural (Croitor and Giurgea 2009, 21).

The neuter in Romanian invariably follows the pattern of masculine-singular, feminine-plural in terms of noun form and agreement. Thereby what is created is a situation in which a neuter gender is present, as it is categorized and upheld as such, but this neuter is present with noun and agreement endings pertaining to the feminine and masculine grammatical genders.

Taking into consideration the present situation in which new media containing nonbinary or agender characters is created in the Anglophone world, the present paper aims to discuss the difficulties imposed by the translation of such content into Romanian, wherein the three genders present in the grammar force the translator to inadvertently gender queer characters, or to devise other methods of translation which would avoid the use of any syntactic agreement displaying gender (such as in adjectives and in pronouns).

The novel used to give a case study on the possible solution for non-gendered language is *Too like the Lightning* by Ada Palmer, pertaining to the Terra Ignota series, published in 2016 by Head of Zeus. The society of the *Terra Ignota* series (*Too like the Lightning* being the first installment) has abolished all genders, and all inhabitants go by the gender-neutral ‘they’. However, as it is shown in the novel, the mandatory disregard of gender (and religion) has issued a reactionary movement within the ruling class endowed with the possibility of eschewing the law. The text of the *Terra Ignota* series invites the reader, in the first volume, not to perform gender, but to challenge what exactly it is besides biology that dictates the performance of gender as such. The main plot of the series in which it is shown that the pretense of peace was upheld with the aid of calculated assassinations (disguised as car accidents among others) is aided by the discussion of gender-neutrality and its imposition onto the global society as a means of creating equality (and, consequently, censorship in what regards discussing the prevailing gender inequality within the society).

The novel is intended as a reflection of a future society in which this gender-neutral identity has become the norm, with any mention of gender identity being

outlawed. As such, it is an exaggeration of the American society in which “the current trend which views the gender pronouns conventionally referring to men and women (like the personal pronoun he/she in English) [are seen] as inadequate, because [they are] unable to refer to those who don’t identify with this gender binary. In English the use of the singular they has been offered as an alternative gender neutral and/or gender inclusive pronoun (also defined as “unisex they,” “common-gender,” or “epicene” pronoun).” (Di Sabato and Perri 2020, 367).

Mycroft Canner, the implied narrator, begins his narration not with an apology, as the chapter is titled *An apology to the reader*, but with a challenge: in a world where it is not the biological features which determine the gender, what other aspects could determine the gender used for characters by the narrator to grant them the gendered pronouns?

Methodology

In the elaboration of the paper, a combination of literary analysis and comparative analysis has been used. These two were aided by sociolinguistic considerations so as to motivate certain conclusions and postulations. Specific linguistic and grammatical features in the Target language are analyzed before an exercise in translation is conducted, discussing the resulted forms of the TT.

Existing research in the field of translation and queer theory are also analyzed, putting into perspective the challenges encountered by translators in recreating gender ambiguity or understanding gender ambiguity before its transposition into the TL. Extant sociocultural features of the target culture are also emphasized in an effort to contextualize the grammatical choices translators must make and to explore the challenges and implications of translating gender identity, particularly non-binary characters, into Romanian.

Machine translation has not yet been taken into account, as there is a limitation imposed on the scope of the paper, however future papers on the matter of translation aim to showcase the inherent biases of AI used for translation where there is a machine-learning component, and the bias behind the mentality of the machine, namely of the programmers and specialists involved in its development.

Instead of there being a specific conclusion in mind, where only one answer is correct, and given that the field of translation is not an exact science, but a matter of creativity on the part of the translator, which can result in multiple valid target texts, the analysis herein aims to highlight the many approaches created in the act of translation in Romanian for the purpose of accommodating nonbinary or agender people and characters. An overarching question that will remain even at the conclusion of the study is whether Romanian not as a language, but as a culture, can grow (both linguistically and culturally) to accept queer identities.

This SF novel, for any other genre would not fit it as well, raises a question about gender and fiction: it is easy to attribute the gender neutral to alien races, and to allow them to perform androgyny. However, when the gender is erased from a decidedly human society, whose tradition is still heavily influenced by gender, to what extent is it a feasible action, and what purpose does it have? As the narrative evolves to shift around the various hives of the future society, we find an all-encompassing and pervasive obsession with not only gender but also religion among the ruling hives.

The narrative thus questions the stability of a system that abolishes gender in a setting which would find ways to monitor for the use thereof with the exception of the places under the aegis of the hives. The gender attribution as such is challenged by Mycroft not as being dated, but as being arbitrary, motivating that biological sex is not the standard by which gender should be attributed, but by the features and demeanor of the person in question. Nevertheless, Mycroft themselves seem, at certain points, to attribute gender to people merely on the basis of outward appearance.

These musings of Mycroft, present in the narrative of the first two novels – *Too Like the Lightning* and *Seven Surrenders* –, anticipating the complaints of the reader, give us a glimpse inside the functioning of this society. The implication that Mycroft would choose to switch the gender of Carlyle so that the abuse by Dominic's hands should follow the stereotypical and prevalent scenario in which the female is the victim, determines a reconsideration of homosexuality in the Terra Ignota society. Given that, once with the abolishing of gender, so are the labels placed on relationships abolished themselves, and with their resurgence so do old prejudices resurge. However, Mycroft himself, were the resurgence of sexuality and the labels thereof to happen, would fall within the category of a minority, as a man in a homosexual relationship. As such, it is difficult to say if this would point towards an internalized homophobia or simply an upholding of old prejudices, not his own.

As such, Carlyle, while not a prototypical female, is burdened with the internalized prejudice of society, be it cloaked, as all Cousins are 'she', according to Mycroft, through their choice of profession.

It is then understood that the gender dynamic in the *Terra Ignota* society with neuter genders is not upheld by the biological sex, but by the perceived gender of each individual. However the stereotypes and prejudices of sexism still exist, and follow each individual with respect to the choice of gender and gender expression they have made.

These questions raised in the SF novel are difficult to reconcile with the status quo of the present, which is the main aim of the SF device of defamiliarization, the shift in focus and perception in order to make the reader question what part they play in the status quo of their own society.

However, in translation, more difficulties occur when a translation must be performed in such a way to create the same defamiliarizing effect in the reader. And, as Čudová states:

The relatively recent development of many identity labels and the lack of empirical research into minority genders and orientations pose certain problems for many LGBTQ+ people, especially those belonging to more underrepresented groups within the LGBTQ+ minority. While for example the concept of homosexuality has been named and described over a hundred years ago, other orientations such as bisexuality or a sexuality have a relatively short history, dating barely several decades back. Consequently, the society is less informed and therefore less likely to understand the unique issues these minority groups are facing in their relationships and daily lives. A [sic!] similar lack of information in the general society impacts the lives of people whose experience of gender is somehow outside the socially perceived norms (Čudová 2021, 46).

While homosexuality is readily understood within most societies, the shift in gender identity and other, less discussed and mediatized, orientations pose issues when a translator must accurately portray them in the target text of a different culture. Moreover, this is not the only issue with translation, as Baer and Kaindl state that:

[T]ranslation and interpreting studies scholars have reacted to queer theory with some delay, and research focusing on queer aspects of translation and interpreting have, until only recently, been rare, rather uncoordinated, and often marred by conceptual confusion—so that not all works dealing with issues of sexuality and specifically homosexuality can be considered queer (Baer and Kaindl 2017, 1).

It is then the case that we do not have the perfect translator from this beginning hypothesis. A translator which knows the concepts in the source language and what is lacking in the expression of the target language in order to perform the transposition of the message within the novel, and create meaning into the target language is impossible to have when the source culture is an invented and restricted to the source media. Instead, we are given the imperfect translator, who is, in turn, faced with confusion upon meeting concepts they do not understand. This misapprehension of source concepts leads, oftentimes, not to an incursion into the source culture, but to a mechanical translation of the text into the target language, largely due to the time constraint present in translation. A question can be asked regarding “How do we understand translation not as a flawless bridge or as total impossibility but as a mode of analysis that opens up ways of seeing the very conditions under which it unfolds?” (Savci 2020, 59).

The ideal circumstance of translation, in which the translator is knowledgeable of both cultures perfectly, will still produce a work which will

defamiliarize the reader, because “translation – by infusing target language with otherness – disrupts both the source and the target language”. (Baldo 2017, 193).

When it comes to the very gender identity of the characters involved in the novel being translated, it cannot be ignored, or avoided. However, there are certain issues stemming from the attempt to translate gender-neutral characters into a language that is high in syntactic gender agreement (i.e. between the nouns, which are gendered, and the adjectives), yet does not possess a way of referring to something in a truly gender-neutral way, as the neuter gender in Romanian is, as exemplified above, either masculine or feminine, depending on the form of the noun: in the singular or in the plural. For example, the maintaining of a method of reference to the person without there being any gendered language involved, a process which is hard to recreate in a way that sounds natural. Moreover, the avoidance of any gendered language in relation to nonbinary characters would create – instead of an inclusive environment – an erasure of identity conducted through the removal of any possible indicators of the person’s gender non-conformity.

For a translator, the question of gender ambiguity cannot be ignored. Avoiding gender marking may be difficult in English, but it becomes even more difficult in a language with gender agreement; for instance, gendered participles and adjectives in Italian definitively disambiguate the gender of the narrator unless specific translation solutions are sought out. The incipit of Poe’s story and the renowned Italian translation by Elio Vittorini and Delfino Cinelli (1937), which genderizes the narrator, is enough to elicit this point: “TRUE! nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why WILL you say that I am mad?”/“Sul serio! Io sono nervoso, molto nervoso, e lo sono sempre stato. Ma perché pretendete che io sia pazzo?” “Nervoso” (“nervous”), “stato” (“been”), “pazzo” (“mad”) all carry the masculine inflection, which implies that the narrator is male (Di Sabato and Perri 2020, 368).

The above quote is a very apt representation of the difficulty encountered by translators in the transposition of texts. The same matter is present within Romanian, as well, which will be the language showcased in the present paper. The prevalence of gender agreement in participles and adjectives in Romanian, at the same time as the lack of a neutral non-gendered root of the words (the root thereof being the male form of the word, e.g. “frumos”-”frumos”-”frumoasă” being the root-masculine-feminine forms of the adjective) brings about the issue of being unable to maintain an ambiguity of gender of characters with the constraints of the grammar of the language involved, in this case Romanian.

As in many other languages, nouns categorized as masculine in English have conventionally been used as “generic,” thus referring both to men and women, as in “The relationship between man and his dog”, where man stands generically for “human being” thus comprising women as well. Such generic or unmarked uses of masculine

forms are present in many languages, and have been increasingly considered forms of sexist language. Alternatives like neutral nouns (for instance, in English humans instead of mankind, people instead of men), or reference to both pronouns as in the spelling s/he or to the unmarked plural they are increasingly preferred (Di Sabato and Perri 2020, 363).

Such an approach will be present in the translations attempted below, in the creation of a new pronoun in Romanian to encompass both genders and thus signify none. The ethics of creating such a pronoun, however, lie in a gray area, as dictating what a marginalized community can use to express themselves in a language could be construed as an act of oppression. Ideally, the translation would be done with consultation from or by a person pertaining to the LGBT+ community, wherein the pronouns and ways of addressing characters can be descriptions from within the target language and culture, instead of prescriptions of language to use.

[T]he standard communication model proposed by information theorists (Sender, Message, Addressee – in which the message is decoded on the basis of a Code shared by both the virtual poles of the chain) does not describe the actual functioning of communicative intercourses. The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender), and the rate of initiative displayed by the addressee in making presuppositions and abductions result in making a message (insofar as it is received and transformed into the *content* of an *expression*) an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed (Eco 1979, 5).

Then, taking into account the above quote, we are given the issue that translation in itself is not just words and a low range of meaning attributed to them, but also the valances attributed to them in various sociolinguistic circumstances, which the translator must be aware of, in order to properly transpose the text into a different language and undergo another process of reception, namely by the reader. As it stands,

[t]he author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them (Eco 1979, 7).

As Eco states on the matter of the Model Reader, as there is a Model Translator there has to be, at a basic level at least, a model of the targeted audience, which is reflected in the

“(i) of a specific linguistic code, (ii) of a certain literary style, and (iii) of specific specialization-indices (a text beginning with /According to the last developments of

the TeSWeST .../ immediately excludes any reader who does not know the technical jargon of text semiotics) (Eco 1979, 7).

As such, if we were to apply this specific theory to the *Terra Ignota* series, the reader envisioned is first and foremost a contemporary or a historian looking back on the events, moreover it is a person who is more or less familiarized with the societal reformation, if not directly then made familiarized through research into that time period.

This identity of the reader is, of course, fabricated, for in the science-fictional genre the reader is never a contemporary of the author, but a contemporary of the narrator, and given the state of *unreal* that are the fictional worlds, the actual readers of the novel become impostors almost illegally involved, as time-jumping voyeurs, into the plot of the work of Science Fiction, generating the estranging effect of the work of SF.

This assumed level of competence of the reader again plays a part in the reception of the novel, and within the paper one can draw a parallel between the translations and conclude that the identity of the reader, especially of the reader-mediator (the translator) whose job it is to first receive the message of the writer as intended, with the purpose of retelling it to the other readers within a specific culture. As Umberto Eco states:

pragmatically speaking, this situation [of the Model Reader] is a very abstract and optimal one. In the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author (Eco 1979, 8).

The situation he presents is one in which this interpretation of the code is unwittingly done, lacking intention, whereas when it comes to Science Fiction, this effect, this process of interpretation is done with intention behind it.

The Reader/Translator of the text of SF is not always the Model Reader/Translator, and this is not unintentional on the part of the author. As with the given languages of the novels we see alterations which are open to interpretation with respect to not only their origin but the origin of their change, the model reader is also subjected to questioning when it comes to their purpose as an element in the analysis of the text of fiction. The issues arising from the end of the translator with respect to queer visibility in novels is that

the process of translation can also lead to an erasure of the queerness of both texts and authors, sometimes due to direct censorship and sometimes to the queerphobic biases of a particular translator (Palekar 2017, 12).

In analyzing the code of a specific created language, one cannot possibly leave out of the analysis both the sender of the message and the recipient, as they are integral parts in the parsing and processing of information. Close reading offers not only information regarding the text and its self-standing analysis, but also, in the context of science fiction works, of the intended backdrop of knowledge shared by both participants in the act of relaying this message that is the novel, as an unanchored message lacks the coherency needed to analyze it completely.

As such, the actual reader of the sf works is not just made privy to this information, we are made known of what we should be, so as impostors, we can attempt to mold ourselves, our reception thereof and our horizons of expectations to the expectations of the narrator. As illicit observers of an assumed authentic recounting, the reader themselves becomes part of the action.

Whether directly, as Mycroft Canner's reader, who routinely becomes involved and critiques the way in which the narrative progresses, or not, the reader is an integral part of the story.

Unfortunately, the only one not to have been 'inflexibly' planned is the reader. These texts are potentially speaking to everyone. Better, they presuppose an average reader resulting from a merely intuitive sociological speculation — in the same way in which an advertisement chooses its possible audience. It is enough for these texts to be interpreted by readers referring to other conventions or oriented by other presuppositions, and the result is incredibly disappointing (or exciting — it depends on the point of view) (Eco 1979, 8).

However, in a digression from Eco's statement, a reader of SF is almost anyone *but* the intended reader. This model reader and the actual readers of the novel are both, to a certain degree, planned for. The actual model reader of the novel can never hope to become the presupposed model reader of the novel, because they are an impossibility. As such, the actual reader assumes this role of an impostor model reader for the conducting of the message-relaying act. Moreover, the impostor model reader of utmost importance is the translator, a person working under the presumption that they understand a language and its culture. However, in the case of the SF society of the creation of the author, there is only one person familiarized with that society, and as such a divide in levels of understanding is created for all others interacting with the work of fiction.

Difficulties of translation and comprehension do not only occur when a text is translated from one language to another. In a way that is precisely analogous to the intersectionality of queer, translation between languages can serve as a paradigm for all those processes of bungled appropriation, barely acknowledged plagiarism, exploitation and distortion which together constitute the habitus of the colonizer

towards the colonized, the adult towards children, the imitator and the adaptor towards the alleged original (Epstein and Gilett 2017, 2).

Translation will inevitably become erasure in the present case of transposing queer identities, where English as a culture has had an increase in awareness of marginalized identities of people, which has led to the creation of mainstream works of SF which the reader readily understands from the outset, and has the ability not to only understand the identities as quasi-familiar, but can also progress to discussing the complexities of a society where any other identity other than the one marginalized is lawful.

Cultures and languages which are passive consumers of Anglophone media have yet to evolve to include such terms and concepts in the vernacular, and are as such at an impasse when faced with the issue of familiarizing the reader and using a language which is grammatical. Moreover, the minority identities represented and translated from a language to another might not perfectly align, as identities are not immutable and can differ in ideology and way of expression from culture to culture.

are the very terms used for gender and sexual identities in one language necessarily reducible to equivalents in other languages, particularly when one works across historical periods and/or across cultures? Attention to these very transgressions, these slippages of signification, these differences, when we work across languages and cultures is, in effect, a comparatively queer praxis (Spurlin 2017, 173).

Analysis

All present matters taken into account, the present analysis will attempt to create three translations of selected short fragments from the novel *Too Like the Lightning* by Ada Palmer, and proceed to outline the differences, with the aim of showcasing the various approaches which can be attempted in translation and what devices could be used to eschew the limitations imposed by the target language itself. As the paper is subject to limitations in terms of dimension, an in-depth analysis of the novel is not currently possible. As such, a full picture will not be made of the novel for the purpose of the readership to become acquainted with the source culture of the SF novel.

Firstly, we must showcase the chosen fragments for the purpose of motivating their choice.

1. Your **mother** was brave enough, Kohaku Mardi, when **he** felt the agonies of my poisons setting in, **he** slit **his** belly with a calm to make his ancestors proud, and, **woman** of iron, even wrote the message in **his** own blood (Palmer 2016, 434-435).
2. Confess, reader, you too rush to the window to see when **they** walk by, and point them out to eager friends, "Look at **the Utopian!**" (Palmer 2016, 182).

3. Seventeen people, Thisbe! **They** hacked pieces off of Luther Mardigras for five days before **they** burned **them** alive in a wicker man! Burned what was left of **them**! [...] 'Mycroft Canner forced the last Deputy Censor to disembowel **themselves** with a piece of bamboo!' (Palmer 2016, 305).
4. this **madamed**'arouet is almost invisible too, **they** haven't used a car in years and years. **they're** on the wish list, though [...] (Palmer 2016, 429-430).

The above fragments show enough digression from grammatical binary genders to pose issues to the translator not due to the ideology of them, but due to the fact that the translator cannot rephrase the sentences in the target language in order to remove all connotation of the gender-neutral gender identity. As such the variation present in them will prove, despite their apparent simplicity, difficult to mediate in translation.

The following fragments, though they qualify for occurrence of gender-neutral pronouns used in dialogue, do not qualify as apt fragments for the present exercise in types of translation operated on queer texts due to the ease with which the pronouns can be eschewed in Romanian, thus eliminating the issue at hand of showcasing the difficulty of translation:

1. 'Has J.E.D.D. Mason ever told you what religion **they** believe in? Have **they** tried to get you to convert?' [...] '**They've** already crossed a lot of lines', Carlyle pushed (Palmer 2016, 288).
2. Dominic Seneschal is a maniac, but at least they picked a law they'll follow (Palmer 2016, 364).
3. No, I don't mean the Emperor, uh... Mycroft said **they'd** be...' 'Mycroft?' [...] Oh! Bless me! You want the Young Master, Jehovah Mason! I'm sorry, I'm not used to hearing **Him** called by **his** last name (Palmer 2016, 365).
4. **they're** actually your **child**, aren't they, Director? (Palmer 2016, 396).

The pronouns could very well be avoided in translation and the gender neutral term for offspring in Romanian would negate the gender-neutral writing of the source text, as well as the possibility of writing a perfectly grammatical sentence in the Romanian language while avoiding the Subject of the sentence completely, allowing for the subject of the sentence to be a general third person singular, without disclosing the gender or biological sex of the character.

The following translations are the hybrid translation, an attempt which aims to create an effect of confusion within the reader in regards to gender by purposefully using syntactic disagreement by using a feminine-gendered noun with a masculine-gendered adjective: the domesticating translation, which attempts to avoid all mention of the gender-neutral pronouns and way or making reference to people, and the foreignizing approach, which will showcase a defamiliarizing universe though

employing a created pronoun and a gender-neutral suffix added to adjectives and participles.

The parameters used in attempting the translations rested on the framework of gender and queer theory with regards to creating an understanding of the characters and their perception within the source culture of the country in which the novel was initially published, as well the source culture of the SF work and the contrast between the two, in order to create a multi-faceted understanding of the concept of queerness within and without the novel. Comparative linguistics and Translation Ethics are also used in the elaboration of the translations, as a cultural adaptation facet is present in the source text, namely the queer identity which cannot be wholly transposed into Romanian.

Hybrid approach

1.

ST	"Your mother was brave enough, Kohaku Mardi, when he felt the agonies of my poisons setting in, he slit his belly with a calm to make his ancestors proud, and, woman of iron, even wrote the message in his own blood" (Palmer 2016, 434-435).
TT	Mama ta a fost tare curajos , Kohaku Mardi, când a simțit agonia otrăvii în corp, și-a despicat burta cu un calm care i-ar fi făcut pe strămoșii lui mândri, și, femeie de fier, a scris mesajul în propriul lui sânge.

2.

ST	"Confess, reader, you too rush to the window to see when they walk by, and point them out to eager friends, 'Look at the Utopian! '" (Palmer 2016, 182).
TT	Recunoaște, cititorule, că și tu te repezi la geam când îi vezi pe ai de-ai lor, și le arăți și prietenilor tăi entuziasmați „Uite unul de-al Utopienilor!”

3.

ST	"Seventeen people, Thisbe! They hacked pieces off of Luther Mardigras for five days before they burned them alive in a wicker man! Burned what was left of them! " [...] "Mycroft Canner forced the last Deputy Censor to disembowel themselves with a piece of bamboo!" (Palmer 2016, 305).
TT	„Șaptesprezece oameni, Thisbe!” Luther Martin a fost tranșat strategic timp de cinci zile înainte să ardă de viu în omul de răchită! Toate rămășițele au fost arse!” [...] „Obligat/ă de MC, și ultimul/a Vice-Cenzor s-a despicat cu o bucată de bambus în dreptul burții!”

4.

ST	"<this madamed' arouet is almost invisible too, they haven't used a car in years and years. they're on the wish list, though [...]" (Palmer 2016, 429-430).
TT	Doamna d'arouet ăsta, e aproape de nesesizat, n-a mai mers cu masina de ani de zile. Are numele pe listă, totuși [...]

Domesticating

1.

ST	"Your mother was brave enough, Kohaku Mardi, when he felt the agonies of my poisons setting in, he slit his belly with a calm to make his ancestors proud, and, woman of iron, even wrote the message in his own blood" (Palmer 2016, 434-435).
TT	" Maică-ta a avut destul curaj , când a simțit agoniile otrăvii, încât să-și despică burta cu un calm care i-ar fi făcut pe strămoșii tăi mândri, și ca o femeie cu un caracter de fier, a și scris mesajul în propriul sânge".

2.

ST	"Confess, reader, you too rush to the window to see when they walk by, and point them out to eager friends, 'Look at the Utopian! '" (Palmer 2016, 182).
TT	"Recunoaște, cititorule, și tu te repezi la geam să îi vezi când trec pe acolo, și îi arăți cu degetul prietenilor tăi entuziasmați, "Uite Utopienii!"

3.

ST	"Seventeen people, Thisbe! They hacked pieces off of Luther Mardigras for five days before they burned them alive in a wicker man! Burned what was left of them! " [...] "Mycroft Canner forced the last Deputy Censor to disembowel themselves with a piece of bamboo!" (Palmer 2016, 305).
TT	"Șapțișpe oameni, Thisbe! A hăcuit bucăți din Luther Martin timp de cinci zile înainte să ardă de viu în omul de răchită! A ars toate rămășițele" [...] Ultimul Vice-cenzon s-a tăiat pe burtă cu o bucată de bambus la ordinele date de Mycroft Canner!"

4.

ST	"<this madamed' arouet is almost invisible too, they haven't used a car in years and years. they're on the wish list, though [...]" (Palmer 2016, 429-430).
TT	"Nici Madame d'arouet nu prea are vizibilitate, n-a mai mers cu mașina de ani și ani. E pe listă, totuși [...]"

Foreignized

1.

ST	“Your mother was brave enough, Kohaku Mardi, when he felt the agonies of my poisons setting in, he slit his belly with a calm to make his ancestors proud, and, woman of iron, even wrote the message in his own blood” (Palmer 2016, 434-435).
TT	Mamul tău a fost destul de curajosx , când a simțit agonia otrăvii instalându-i-se în corp, să-și despică burta cu un calm care i-ar fi făcut strămoșii mândri, și, [femeix] cu caracter de fier, a scris mesajul în propriul său sânge.

2.

ST	“Confess, reader, you too rush to the window to see when they walk by, and point them out to eager friends, ‘Look at the Utopian! ’ ” (Palmer 2016, 182).
TT	“[...] și tu te grăbești la fereastră să vezi când apare vreunx , și-i arăți cu degetul prietenilor tăi “Uite un Utopianx”.

3.

ST	““Seventeen people, Thisbe! They hacked pieces off of Luther Mardigras for five days before they burned them alive in a wicker man! Burned what was left of them! ” [...] “Mycroft Canner forced the last Deputy Censor to disembowel themselves with a piece of bamboo!” (Palmer 2016, 305).
TT	“Șapțișpe oameni, Thisbe! Ela a hăcuit bucăți din Luther Mardigras timp de cinci zile, înainte să îlo ardă în omul de răchită! A ars ce mai rămăsese din ela! [...] Mycroft Canner l-a obligat pe ultimx Vice-Cenzor să se spintece pe abdomen cu o bucată de bambus!”

4.

ST	“<this madamed ’arouet is almost invisible too, they haven’t used a car in years and years. they’re on the wish list, though [...]” (Palmer 2016, 429-430)
TT	“și madam d’arouet axta e aproape invizibilx , ela n-a folosit o mașină de ani și ani. E pe listă, totuși [...]”

Discussion

As we can notice from the above, the three approaches, the hybridised, the domesticating, and the foreignizing, all present different iterations of a possible translation of the novel.

The hybridised form aims to create an effect of a disjointed understanding of gender, with the mixing of, for example, female-subjects such as mother, with

adjectives forming an agreement with an opposite-sex subject, in order to attempt to maintain this idea of gender-neutrality, which could be continued throughout the novel either by alternating the perceived gender of the subject with an opposite-gender agreement of the other syntactic parts, or by maintaining the masculine syntactic agreement, regardless of the gender with which agreement would naturally be created.

The second translation, the foreignizing one, attempted to create neopronouns that would accurately represent the society of the Terra Ignota future, that is, one that has eliminated all discussion of gender and has as such replaced them with something neutral, that would combine both forms of the pronoun, so that there is an underlying sense of equality behind the choice in pronouns. The adjectives, however, were created by having the word in its root form and adding an “-x” suffix to it, to signify the deletion of a morphologic gender marker on the specific word.

An interesting approach we can see is in the translation done in 3.1 (Foreignized, the first example) we can see that the Source Text (ST) “your mother” is translated with a variant of *mama* (f.), where the definite enclitic article for the female gender (“-a”) is replaced with the masculine enclitic definite article (“-ul”), thus creating the disjointed understanding of gender that the novel is attempting to create. However, the method of achieving it is less than optimal as there is still gender present in language, though it is mixed enough to not definitely point toward one or another in terms of identity. The approach aims to deconstruct this genderization, as “Genderization, in particular, poses challenges to finding or creating translation equivalents between gendered and non-gendered languages, i.e., languages with and without morphologically marked grammatical gender” (Nossem 2017, 183).

The very crux of the matter in the translation eschewing gender to one’s best ability is that there is an inherent erasure enacted on the gender non-conforming characters, thus tacitly sustaining a bias against the LGBTQIA+ minority present in the text. As such, while these translations are viable from a grammatical standpoint, culturally and ethically they become an instrument of erasure that cannot be dispelled without the intervention of the translator within the text to add specific information regarding the person’s gender or lack thereof, thus reducing the effect of immersion of the reader.

Moreover, neither the translation containing the “-x” gender neutral marker on the adjectives, nor the usage of Romanian neopronouns are currently approved by any Romanian language institution, and as such that translation would transgress the grammatical norms of the language, leaving the translator at an impasse: does one translate and erase identity, or does one produce an ‘ungrammatical’ work, which could be rejected by the editor?

Conclusion

The many facets of translation are always subject to the whims of the translator and their inherent bias towards one extreme or the other. There is no uniform understanding of how a translation should be conducted, though there is great debate on the matter and great desire to uphold the ethics of translation, though a perfect translation is rather impossible to achieve, especially given the structural constraints existing in language.

When it comes to the translation operated on unknown cultures, however, the matters are just as complex, as the translator, while recognizing the language of the source text, does not recognize the culture of the SF society, and must thus operate the translation and become the liaison of the foreign culture with the very few means they have of acquainting themselves with the source text, be it by consulting online resources on the novel, if any, or by contacting the writer of the source text. This is not to say that these two methods of acquainting oneself with the source text will necessarily yield answers in terms of what the translation will look like.

As Epstein and Gilett state:

Those who translate must necessarily be acquainted with two languages. Like Teiresias in the field of gender and sexuality, they are archetypally bi; this conveys on them both privileged insights and a particular form of blindness. Working within duality, they must also be aware of the essential doubleness of language itself, of the arbitrary correlation between sign and signification, of the duplication that is made possible by the existence of the metaphorical dimension as well as the literal one, and of the complexities of cultural interpellation (Epstein and Gilett 2017, 3).

Yet the matter of SF translation is rarely, if ever, broached when it comes to queer futures not rooted in the status quo.

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INTERSECTIONAL GENDER-QUEER FEMINIST DESIRE (OR, WHAT THE HETERO GAZES MISS WHEN WATCHING “I LOVE DICK”)



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Abstract

Sarah Gubbins and Joey Soloway's recent series "I love Dick" – an adaptation of a cult feminist novel by Chris Kraus – demonstrates a rare, visceral grasp of the deep roots of gender oppression. The response to this oppression is intersectional, anti-racist, gender-queer empowerment and feminist desire. It's inspiring and must be defended from (misunderstanding vis-à-vis) the perspective of the heteronormative gaze, still dominant together with the masculinist and racist gaze in the maturing 21st century. In its deviations from the novel, the screen adaptation activates intersectional connections that remain underdeveloped in the original. If the novel mines sexual oppression and gives voice to feminist desire in its raw and terrific power, I read the series as excavating sexual oppression at the intersection of sex, gender, race and class, and giving voice to (gender-)queer desire in all its fantastic force.

Key words

intersectionality, gender-queer theory, feminism, desire, anti-racism, series

"Is it then necessary to use our organs like the others do? Cannot we transform our eating-tools into purely artistic organs of perception? Cannot we do the same with our sexual system? According to me, the transformation of the organism belongs to the intentions of nature".

Paul Scheerbart, *I Love You*¹

The dominant heteronormative gaze, along with the masculinist and racist gaze, is still all but ubiquitous in the maturing 21st century². The recent Amazon TV series "I love Dick" – adopted by Sarah Gubbins and Joey Soloway from a cult feminist novel

¹ Translation by Elisa Santucci in unpublished dissertation, *B. Anal*.

² I thank my students at JHU in our inquiry into "Critical Knowledges: Black, feminist, queer, other", for highlighting this point. Although no dominant gaze is monolithic and dominant gazes may be more accurately described in the plural, I use the singular to underscore such gazes' too often successful aim at reification.

by Chris Kraus – demonstrates a rare, visceral grasp of the deep intersectional roots of gender oppression. The response to this oppression is intersectional, gender-queer empowerment and feminist desire. It's inspiring and must be defended from (misunderstanding vis-à-vis) the perspective of the heteronormative gaze³.

Kraus's 1997 novel was not appreciated until the 21st century, according to Alexandra Schwartz (Schwartz 2017). Similarly, its 2017 on-screen adaptation, led by Soloway, continues to be misunderstood and underestimated by both critics and enthusiasts. This story of desire is not only timely and relevant but points at the heart of oppression *and* its overcoming. In deviations from the novel (lamented by some of its fans), the screen adaptation highlights intersectional connections that alter the narrative structure. If the novel mines sexual oppression of women and gives voice to feminist desire in its raw and terrific power, I *read* the series as excavating sexual oppression at the intersection of sex, gender, race and class and giving voice to intersectional, (gender-)queer desire in all its fantastic force. To miss this passage attests to the enduring epistemic power of dominant gaze/s in the matrix of domination.

A summary can rarely if ever do justice to a work of art. Yet to facilitate understanding, I briefly sketch out the plot of Chris Kraus' book *I Love Dick*, before addressing the ways in which the on-screen adaptation builds on the transformative scope of the story. Kraus's autobiographical and theoretical novel focuses on her apparent sexual desire for a colleague of her husband's, whose name is Dick. The feminist force of the work arises from the ways in which Kraus *shamelessly* expresses her desire, in the process questioning entrenched gender and sexual norms that govern heteronormativity⁴. The names Dick and Chris are felicitous to such an undertaking: the ever-explicit Dick, and the apparently gender-neutral Chris, whose expression of desire moves the story beyond the realms of shame. These names highlight how much the seemingly simple reversal of gendered places between subject and object of desire open the door to subverting dominant narratives.

In analyzing the TV series' deviations from the original, I start with details that lead to the its deep anchoring in the concrete crests and limitations of its own visual medium⁵. In the novel, the nominal addressee of the title, and one of the (emphatically *not* three) main characters: Dick, is a cultural theorist and colleague of Sylvère (Kraus 1997). Sylvère is married to Chris Kraus - the author of the novel and main character of both the novel and the series. In the series, rather than being a British theorist, Dick is a Texan artist and director of the interdisciplinary art institute in Marfa, Texas, where Sylvère is a visiting fellow. It is certainly possible to lament any changes in terms of unfaithfulness to the original. Yet, however

³ See Fazekas' critical essay on the so-called "female gaze" in this series.

⁴ In "Queer Performativity," a key text of queer theory, Sedgwick defines queerness as a playful (rather than a shameful) relation to shame.

⁵ For a specific analysis of feminist pedagogy through video in the series, see Sinwell.

perfect Dick's role as a theorist may be in a written text (underscoring the shared medium of language in theoretical and textual work), his erection of enormous and rather phallic art pieces in the desert is a perfect on-screen adaptation that visually represents the pomp of phallic power. Just as the name Dick exposes the nominalism of Lacanian collusion of symbolic and phallic power through the-Name-of-the-Father, so Dick's in-your-face sculptures that are little more than bricks and rocks whose power comes from interpretation and requires technology to erect, highlight the vulnerability and fallibility of the gendered symbolic⁶. Dick's position as Sylvère's superior in the series also succinctly underscores the professional power that he is attributed by Kraus in the novel. Most of the changes Soloway implements are those of a careful translator who adapts images from the page onto the screen, if not in the most subtle way, then nevertheless in both a situated and an effective manner.

These translations make for a stunning visual experience, one in which beauty is deeply anti-normative, and thus also transformative. In this vein, the obsessive love letters Chris pens to Dick are transformed from self-analysis into what Schwartz calls "pathetic sound bites," more akin to manifestos on bumper stickers than critique (Schwartz, *Ibid.*). In addition to accommodating the short form of a screened series, these changes correspond to the alteration in Chris's character between her original journey of direct empowerment in the novel to the more fallible, funny and yes, often pathetic, progression of fumbles she enacts on screen.

This shift can be read as responding to the changing gendered demands on women. Whereas in late 20th century women struggled to overcome limitations set for them by others, in the 21st century the primary issue in many parts of the world has arguably become to reject the constant demands on women to do *everything*. Thus, the struggle is as much how to say "no" to goads for perfectibility and overwork as it is to demand more opportunities. This shift is paralleled by the issues Chris's character experiences in her life as a director.

The Chris of the series is more of a Donna Quixote than a feminist sine qua non or tragic hero of the novel. Her journey in the series is not one of personal self-empowerment qua woman, exactly. Although the series addresses the lingering and ongoing need for this, Chris's trajectory tacitly deviates from any straightforward accomplishment in one direction. This is hilariously and poignantly symbolized by her criticism of Dick's obsession with perfection in "straight lines" ("I love Dick" 2017). Once more, Dick's on-screen representation as a conceptual artist in the desert could not be better suited to represent the clinamen, or veering off the straight course, performed by the series⁷. When Chris brings her work to show Dick to gain admission to his sough-after art seminar, he dismisses her film having seen less than 10 seconds

⁶ Lacan, *Book III. Psychoses*. See also Rubin.

⁷ On the significance of clinamen for critical thought, see Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

of it by saying it is not “his thing”. Outraged by his predetermined dismissal (he had already told her on their first outing with her husband that he is not interested in “women’s films”), Chris attacks one of his sculptures perched in the middle of the exhibition room: a brick. Dick defends “his thing” by pointing to the perfection of straight lines, which become unraveled, or to be more precise, broken, by the *other* characters in the series.

Women/queers of color are repeatedly positioned as both marginalized *and* central for the unfolding of the series. Although the apparently heterosexual white triad (Chris, Dick, Sylvère) appears at the center of the story, the series introduces and features other characters who condition the undoing of the straight trajectory and the exchange (of women) between men⁸. In the first episode, the observant Devon, played dazzlingly by Roberta Colindrez, appears next door to Sylvère and Chris’s new abode in Marfa, Texas. The way the camera presents them – it is not clear in the series which pronoun Devin might prefer (not for lack of attention but, perhaps, because this may not be clear to Devon themselves): hence I will use “they/them”⁹ – continuously focusing on the head, facial expressions, and eyes, situates Devon as arguably *the* main addressee and agent of the work rather than a passive observer. The first time we meet Devon in the pilot episode, they are watching Chris’s meltdown from their trailer after Chris gets the news that her film will not be screened at the Venice film festival. Devon invites Chris in and gives her tips about navigating Marfa. Devon’s family has been living in Marfa for generations, and Devon is the one who “takes care of everything” as the handyperson for the Marfa art institute headed by Dick. Devon lends Chris a pair of cowboy boots to protect her from the abundant rattlers. This gift is not a simple gesture of initiation. Rather, it functions as a totem that sets off the gendered identity exchanges that lie at the heart of the series, progressively decentering the white, class-privileged heteronormativity that ostensible dominates the story. This decentering movement exceeds any simple exchange¹⁰.

Devon is more than the supporting catalyst of transformation: throughout its trajectory the series circumscribes the odyssey of privileged white feminist desire, making space for Devon’s creative, collaborative, critical, intersectional performance. As the story unfolds, Devon will take the responsibility and the blame for shattering Dick’s would-be perfect artwork of straight lines. Although it is Devon’s white lover who knocks over Dick’s brick, she does so in the context of a rehearsal for

⁸ For a succinct, in-depth critique of the exchange of women as the grounds of culture, see Rubin. See also Sedgwick’s *Between Men*.

⁹ “Colindrez refers to the character as ‘she’ sometimes, ‘they’ at other times. ‘If I tried to say ‘Devon is this kind of person’ or even if I said *she* is this kind of person, I think Devon would step in and be like, ‘Nah. I haven’t done it. Why would you?’”.

¹⁰ For more on the separation of the phallus from men, see Butler’s “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary”.

Devon's play, organized by the latter. Thus, it is Devon who gets fired from their job for this out-of-control performance, which they inspire and instigate, if not author.

The series thus proliferates characters and tacitly alters the original relationships of the story. Another change in the on-screen adaptation concerns the letters Chris writes, explicitly addressed to Dick, which are central to the narrative structure of both the novel and the series, yet in critically different ways. In the novel, the missives arise from a playful exchange between Chris and Sylvère (the married couple); whereas in the series Chris pens the first letter while Sylvère is trying to fall asleep. Once her husband finds out about the letters, he is mortified. Although this writing does temporarily become a sexually charged object of exchange sustaining the couple, as soon as Chris turns them into more than a private plaything, that is, a public work of art, it creates a rift between the couple. In her review, Schwartz laments these changes. Schwartz is right in noting that these alterations introduce critical difference into the structure of the narrative. Their accomplishment is to decenter the heterosexual couple, and, ultimately, by becoming objects of connection – rather than exchange – among the othered others in the story, the letters set off a series of signifiers that alter the subterranean substructure for the story¹¹. This subterfugal movement permeates the series, increasingly displacing the terms of exchange at its core. To grasp these alterations better, a brief theoretical detour is useful.

The penultimate, seventh episode, “The Barter Economy,” begins with Chris finally poised to satisfy her apparent sexual desire for Dick. In the previous, sixth episode, Dick and Sylvère come to a reluctant understanding as rational men, the result of which is that Dick agrees to “fuck” Chris so that she can get her desire for him out of her system. This, the men agree eventually, over drinks, is the only way to placate her¹². When Dick comes to Chris's motel room, the atmosphere is strangely flat yet charged, at the same time. Chris senses the rat and vehemently rejects the terms of the exchange.

“The Barter Economy” echoes Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, which examines the anthropological and psychoanalytic intersection of the theories explaining and *de facto* rationalizing (although not thereby *causing*, as Rubin underscores) the oppression of women (Rubin 1975, 201-203). The connection between the series and the critique of the exchange of women as grounding culture and society is vital for grasping the reach of “I love Dick,” and the ways in which Soloway brings it to a contemporary pitch.

Rubin weaves together Lacan's critical and speculative psychoanalytic work on language together with a critique of Levi-Strauss's theories of cultural anthropology to offer a theory of her own on the contingent nature of the subjugation of women

¹¹ Thus, the letters, like the cowboy boots, function as proliferating totems qua wandering phalluses, displacing by proliferation, detachment and wandering, the heteronormative matrix of domination.

¹² See Fazekas's reading of this exchange in terms of the homosocial bond analyzed by Sedgwick in *Between Men* (Fazekas 2018, 93).

(Rubin Ibid.). By reading the implication at the crossroads of Levi-Strauss and Lacan—far from feminist yet at the same time insightful – canonical thinkers, Rubin argues that the unconscious structures of the sex/gender system that subordinates women are historical and changeable. Judith Butler cites Rubin in her revolutionary work on queer theory that understands gender not so much as a gay masquerade but rather as the work of mourning and melancholia (Butler 1990, 92-95). In light of this exchange, gender *and* sex (this is one of Butler’s troubling contributions) are not constructed as if sculpted from nothing, rather the heteronormative matrix of domination re-produces both sex and gender as vectors of intersecting modes of oppression. Mourning the foreclosure of homosexual desire, the sex/gender system is produced to enforce obligatory heterosexuality. And if one cannot so much as admit the loss of homosexual desire, then melancholia defines gender and the sex assignment used to enforce it in the heteronormative matrix (Butler 1990, 77-95).

The melancholy constitution of the sex/gender system in the heteronormative matrix is embodied by the sullen and mesmerizing title character: Dick. In Lacan’s theory, “the name of the father” is defined by the phallus in the symbolic order around which gendered positions are organized. Butler’s essay “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” shows how the phallus is biologically detached from the penis and yet is symbolically attached to...well, the wandering Dick. In Soloway’s version of the story, Dick’s sultry character, played tantalizingly by Kevin Bacon, embodies and gives silence precisely to the gendered mourning that governs the unconscious assignment of positions in the symbolic. But something surprising and radical happens in and through this characterization, which muddies, troubles or queers these positions, if you like, in the best possible way¹³.

The subversive power of the story lies in part in the numerous ways in which Chris refuses to accept Dick’s sexist disinterest in her qua her work. The apparent conflation of Chris and her artistic production parodies the reduction of minoritized feminist work to its gendered and racialized author/s. What is more significant, however, is the way in which Dick’s cool, emotionless clichéd persona serves the very dénouement that strikes at the core of gendered, sexed positions in the matrix of domination.

But before I tell you this story, I need to tell you another story, for which I wager that this quasi-heterosexual whitish drama, however feminist, in fact appears to constitute the foil. The understated (though not for that reason underdeveloped) part of the series constitutes the deep intersectional, gender-queer heartbeat of “I love Dick”. At least, that is my performative *and* critical thesis.

At the climax of the story, when Chris finally leaves her husband and takes her desire into her own hands, she and her two non-competing white cis-male partners are displaced by an episode largely about othered and feminized characters. While it

¹³ See also Fazekas’s astute analysis of Dick as totem of masculine privilege – qua failure (94-5).

is possible to dismiss this episode and the role of queers and women of color throughout the episodes as too small a part of the series to fully decenter the quasi-hetero drama that takes up most of the story, it is structurally central to the plot and propels the narrative into its dénouement. This agency exhibits Soloway's overtly stated intention of "toppling" patriarchy with their work¹⁴. Following this desire, rather than sticking to the original story, lodges an alternate and more compelling – in turn also radically more captivating – narrative of gendered and racialized rhythm that alters the fabric of social life.

The fifth episode, co-written by Soloway, Heidi Schreck and Annie Baker, features the narratives of three characters, two of whom work for the Marfa institute directed by Dick: Paula and Devon, and one who is a visiting fellow there (like Sylvère): Toby. Each of them speaks in her own voice, narrating her experiences, which relate to Dick as a singular position of social power: privileged, entitled, exclusionary¹⁵. Paula Morrison, played by Lily Mojeku, is a black feminist curator, who loves Dick's abstract work but is driven beyond frustration by his refusal to allow her to curate the work of other women of color artists, such as Doris Salcedo and Kara Walker. Toby, played by Bobbi Salvör Menuez, demands to be taken seriously, as Dick is, precisely in her chosen field of art, rather than being forced into "the ghetto of gender studies" (Fazekaš 2018, 92). Devon appears to imitate Dick's masculinity in their genderqueer way. Yet, the final episode picks up on the threads cast throughout the series, where the imitation turns out to be a subversion¹⁶.

The othered others of the story interrupt, decenter and therefore also undermine the white, heteronormative narrative again, in the final episode. As Chris seems poised to finally take Dick by storm (be it an apparently rather pathetic one), another performance interrupts this *uncoupled* narrative. I resist following the events scene by scene to retain an element of surprise for those that have yet to see the series. Thus, the following account preserves luscious lacunas of the story. As Chris makes a splash by seemingly abandoning her hope of seducing Dick as an equal, which resembles the abandonment of pride and dangerously flirts with feminized need and desperation, Devon organizes a performance in Marfa beyond the walls of Dick's art institute. In fact, Dick has already given up his ownership of the institute to Paula; while Devon had already created their own space in an abandoned building, naming it "the Skid". It is outside this reclaimed space that Devon stages and leads a performance of queer masculinity in which numerous men, prominently including local working-class brown and white men, follow Devon in what the latter calls a beauty dance, which is neither a sham nor an ironic ruse.

¹⁴ See Paiella's article on Soloway's call to "topple patriarchy" in their Emmy speech.

¹⁵ Fazekaš argues that these narratives function as "manifestos of intersectional feminism" (91).

¹⁶ Fazekaš discusses Devon's character in terms of the critique of gender masquerade offered by Butler's analysis of "the lesbian phallus"; yet Fazekaš remains ambivalent about the critical subversion Devon's character offers (92-3).

Devon succeeds in activating the rhythm of masculinity transformed in concert from an expression of domination to one of vulnerability. Scenes of this “ritual” as Devon describes it, are, in fact, masculine, feminine, queer, intersectional and beautiful. They are neither brief nor enduring, but transitory, interruptive and temporally / qualitatively (if not quantitatively) central.

Meanwhile, having gained admittance to Dick’s home, shivering, freezing and appearing to have given up all demands, Chris takes a bath in Dick’s tub and uses his deodorant. She then puts on his clothes. When she emerges from the bathroom, Dick seems to have become the shy and vulnerable person that Chris has been up to now. For the first time since the start of the show, Chris looks like she’s wearing clothes that fit. Throughout the previous seven episodes she wears mostly sweet, body hugging and sexy dresses that manage to look out of place. Now, in Dick’s loose-fitting flannel shirt and cowboy jeans (complemented by the necessary cowboy boots Devon had given her in the first episode), Chris points out that his clothes fit her “too well”. The comment only seems to deepen that vulnerability that suddenly animates Dick’s face, replacing his characteristic cool aloofness for the first time. And yet, throughout the episode, and despite every effort to the contrary, the seemingly genuine passion between Dick and Chris remains... choked. The exchange of gendered markers, highlighted by external signs but reaching all the way down to both of the characters’ very personas, may light a fire, but this fire falls short of the collective rhythm that the performance organized by Devon unleashes.

If Kathryn Hahn’s Chris is a bumbling, winning klutz, as Schwartz alleges, it is because she embodies a ‘Donna Quixota,’ who sheds her gendered, hetero limitations without rejecting femininity qua differential humanity. More importantly, perhaps, Chris’ fumbling fallibility situates her as Devon and Paula’s foil. The viewer follows Chris, played bewitchingly by Hahn, as she eats 12 tacos at a taco stand, refusing to accept local customs, and walks out having conquered the object of her desire, menstrual blood streaming from her reappropriated boxer shorts into the borrowed cowboy boots. This *abject* visuality transports intrepid beauty, refusing to be reified into *objects of exchange*.

Although astute interpreters, such as Fazekaš, grasp the significance of the work carried out on the show by Soloway’s adaptation of Kraus’s story, they generally fail to grasp its success in toppling patriarchal imagery precisely because they underestimate the decentering of the privileged heteronormativity it accomplishes (Fazekaš Ibid., 96). Noting the intersectional connections and reversal of gendered positions, Fazekaš remains within a psychoanalytical framework in reading Chris, Devon and the other *feminine* characters (as she underscores) as isolated individuals akin to “the succubus”: desirous of Dick’s privilege (Ibid., 101). This heteronormative, liberal perspective misses the difference between individuality qua freedom in connection, and individualism qua capitalist appropriation.

Perhaps what is at stake is more than missing the point of queer intersectional feminist desire by remaining within the multiple guises of dominant gaze/s. Inspired by Kathy Aker's language for the real Kraus and Chantal Akerman's cinematography for Soloway, the aesthetics of "I love Dick" touch the reclaimed intersectional ethics of the fraught 21st century. This connection: severed, contested, problematic and maligned (long before and since Kant's critiques), is embodied by the performance Devon stages. Through the lens of intersectional aesthetics, beauty can be understood precisely as that quality which belies lookism and connects being/s through a shared – though not thereby universal but rather partial – quality of awe. From this partial, situated, performative perspective, embodied by "the beauty dance" Devon initiates: inviting the workers to join, aesthetics engages ethics as response-ability through connection.

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REALITY AND REPRESENTATION: THE NONFICTION WRITING IN JOHN UPDIKE'S "MOROCCO"



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Abstract

"Morocco" is one of John Updike's short stories concerning family travel s. With the attempt to blur the gap between fiction and nonfiction, Updike experiments in "Morocco" with a new form of represented reality, which reveals a middle ground between the discourse and the depicted world. Through the portrayal of real historical events by juxtaposing the overt family travel narrative and the covert Cold War narrative, the short story mixes realistic travel writing into a fictional representation of Cold War writing. The Cold War writing, especially when represented through a backdrop of baseless fears, forms the covert narrative dynamics and integrates the narrative rupture in the whole overt family travel story where the unreliable narrative techniques in the tale, such as denarration, and disnarration, break up the narrative progression and present various possibilities from the fissured narration. It turns out that the various overt narrative possibilities are restricted by the covert Cold War narrative, thus, the variety of overt narratives in "Morocco" is always constrained by the Cold War ideology. While the travel narrative is at variance with this particular reality, the underlying Cold War ideology, nevertheless, serves as the universal representation.

Key words

historical appropriation, travel narrative, automobile image, cold war narrative, emotional dynamics

Introduction

John Updike (1932-2009), the American writer of novels, short stories, and poetry, was best known for his realistic but subtle depiction of "American, Protestant, small-town, and middle-class" life. As a strong believer in the power and necessity of realistic narrative, he once stated in an interview: "The true novelist is in love with reality. He is a mediator between reality and the reader, and not simply someone who operates in a world of printed words." (Plath 1994, 150). For Updike, the writer's main concern should not only concern words' relationship to one another or the author's subjective consciousness though this is certainly a vital component, but also concern the allegiance of these words to the physical world. Thus, what Updike intends to do in his writing is to link the text with the physical world. Updike's realism or his

literary view of reality is a realistic representation or represented reality, i.e., a middle ground between the discourse and the reality. Updike's realism is similar to J.P. Stern's "middle distance". In *On Realism*, Stern argued that realism walked the middle ground between language and reality, something he referred to as creating the "middle distance" (Stern 1973, 113). The "middle distance" functions through a series of compromise, that is, between the ideal and the real, between the cognitive and the empirical, between our understanding of the world which, partially, is a discursive construction, and the reality outside of this construction.

Since no one can adequately reflect the real world, the reflection of the reality for each writer is not only different but also highly representative. For Updike, how to reflect the ordinary life of the Americans was his focus when representing the reality. As an advocator of realism, he stressed the importance of accuracy: "I find that the main charge, let's call it, that I get out of writing is when I feel I've gotten something down accurately. The main bliss, whether I read Henry Green or Nabokov or Proust or Tolstoy, is the sense that they've described precisely a certain moment of experience, whether it's a dress, a chair, or how a person's face looks" (Plath 1994, 210). Accuracy in the realistic narrative is an important feature that Updike shows in many of his writings. Accuracy for Updike means to construct both the outer world and the inner feelings of the characters in an accurate way that convinces the readers to believe. To achieve the accuracy, Updike would use as exact description as possible, which makes his writing an integration and extension of objective and static description, lacking of action. That may be the reason why Updike is criticized as a polished aesthetician---all polish and lacking in depth: his "own lush stylistic sensuosity [sic] at times obscures his story's action. Such an overbalance of the stylistic, it is claimed, creates literary decadence; having nothing to write about, Updike writes anyway, his lack of substance disguised by a thick sauce of adjectives, adverbs, and nouns" (Klinkowitz 1980, 7). It is partly true that Updike is obsessed with luxurious diction, but it is unfair to criticize Updike lack of depth. He often buries his deep thoughts into the luxurious depiction of the ordinary life, which only needs to be explored.

Ordinary life within the American small towns is often the major concern in Updike's literary writing. The ordinary life, however, in his writing is not a literary reflection of what actually happens in the real world. Just as Saul Bellow once said, "Realism has always both accepted and rejected the circumstances of ordinary life. It [realism] accepts the task of writing about ordinary life and tries to meet it in some extraordinary fashion" (Cronin 1994, 69). The ordinary life under Updike's pen is to meet his expressive needs, which can be different from novel to novel, from story to story. Updike's talent lies that he is good at fictionalizing the ordinary realistic life in a literarily extraordinary way, and making special sense of the ordinary life through specific representation of the reality. Thus, there is both difference and affinity between the reality and representation in his works.

The short story "Morocco" is one of the samples to show Updike's technique and talent of representing the reality through literary way. "Morocco", based on incidents in the spring of 1969, was first published in 1979 in *Atlantic Monthly* and compiled in the short story collection *My Father's Tears, and Other Stories* in 2009. "Morocco", by extending the family life in American small town to that in the foreign land, is a travel memoir of the protagonist "I", an American British, together with his wife and four children to travel in Morocco in 1969. The story, by blending the nonfiction form (memoir as well as travelogue) with the fictionalized plot, which is interwoven with the appropriation of the real historical events, blurs the distinction between a real memoir as well as travelogue and a literary fiction. This writing technique of fictionalized nonfiction is closely related to Updike's fascination with Cold War Ideology. The paper will explore the relationship between this writing technique and Updike's Cold War Ideology.

1. Representation of the Real Historical Events

Updike is an expert in appropriating the real historical event in his writing. He juxtaposes the story time with the real historical event in the story to present a "real" Morocco. In fact, Updike is not the first one trying to present the "real" Morocco. Located in the northern part of Africa, Morocco has long been misguided as the "Far West" of the Europe, an "empty" land ready for exploitation by the so-called pioneering spirit. That's why Morocco has long been explored by European adventurers and travelers. Just as Claudio Minca and Lauren Wagner analyzed, Morocco has been taken as "a space of familiar and mediated experience of difference lying just at the borders of Europe" (2016 xiv). Although from the perspective of Europeans, Morocco has been depicted as a mythic place, however, this mystery has also been combined within a colonial imagery which always entails an exotic inferiority and backwardness. Since the time of Ancient Rome, Africa has been regarded as "Dark Continent", a distant and unknown land where uncivilized barbarians live (Herodotus 1920; Pliny the Elder 2018; Ptolemy 2002). Although the Middle Ages witnessed an ambivalent representation of the Black Africa: hospitality and pleasantly carefree in lifestyle on the one hand and lack of ration and immoral in lifestyle on the other hand (Africanus 2010) the Crusade propaganda remolded North Africa a wicked opponent of Christianity (Schacht and Bosworth 1974). Since the early 16th Century, the transatlantic slave trade had turned the images of African into negative ones (Dapper 1668). Till 18th Century, Morocco was still represented as images of Barbary pirates, veiled women and hooded Muslim men (Dahen & Lausberg 2010). While in 19th Century, Morocco was reproduced, through drawings of Eugene Delacroix, religious mission report of Charles de Foucauld and travelogue of Pierre Loti, as exotic and artistic Orient, picturesque like the lost Garden of Eden. This image of Morocco aroused stronger interest from Europe to further explore Morocco,

which eventually led to the colonization of this land. And in 20th Century, especially after the reconstruction of Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey, the builder of French Protectorate over Morocco from 1912 to 1955 (Miller 2013), Morocco was represented, through writers like Edith Wharton and Elias Canetti, as a tourist attraction, a mixture of Maghreb tradition and European modernity (Wharton 2017; Canetti 2012). These representations of Morocco from the European perspective in the recent centuries vary from images of threat to images of lure, from barbarian land to exotic orient pastoral, from a land of enmity to a land ready to be conquered. No matter what image Morocco is represented, there is always a clue of otherness behind. European images of Morocco have always remained with the imagined Orient: a “pre-modern”, “sensuous and ruthless” (Leerssen 2007) milling crowd with dark skin. Furthermore, the otherness behind Morocco’s representations is always accompanied by the claim that the representation is the embodiment of the “real” and authentic Morocco, as in the case of Updike’s “Morocco”.

Different from the images of “real” Morocco mentioned above, Updike’s representation of “real” Morocco is related to a new historical background – the Cold War. The story time in “Morocco” is set in April, 1969. When they travel to Rabat, the capital city of Morocco, the protagonist and his family encounter the Soviet high-level delegation. The story tells that Nicolai Podgorny and Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet leaders at that time, are paying visit to Hassan II, the king of Morocco. If the reader is familiar with the real history, they will find out that the Soviet delegation did pay a visit to Morocco in the early April, 1969 and the exact date of this visit was on April 2nd, 1969. The readers may be surprised that the fictional protagonist and the real Soviet delegation are in the same place at the same time, which makes the story more convincing to be real. It leaves the impression to the readers that the protagonist probably takes part in the real history and involves in the real encounter with Soviet Union. This also creates a hidden sense of political conflict and a tension between reality and representation in the story at the background of Cold War.

The 1960s witnessed a new period of Cold War between United States and Soviet Union. By the end of the 1960s, a balance of nuclear power had been achieved between US and Soviet Union. Both of the two super powers had realized the destructional consequence of a full-scale nuclear war. Thus, the two military blocs led by US and Soviet Union abandoned the policy of direct military conflicts at the previous period of Cold War and geared to win the support and alliance of the Third World (Kramer 2016), among which the newly independent African countries became the major targets. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Soviet Union remained favorable status in winning the support of the Third World in North Africa and Middle East, which meant Soviet Union got more competitive advantage over US outside of their traditional areas of influence. The reason for the downbeat of US in shedding its influence over African and Middle East regions can be traced back to Jefferson’s concern about “canaille”, the mob during the French Revolution. It is

believed in the future presidents of US that the condition to obtain liberty for any people is the possession of private property and unpropertied people do not deserve the freedom (Westad 2005). Among those excluded were the newly independent African countries in the 1950s. This made Soviet Union on the way to turn the world "in their way" by shedding more political influence over the Third World in 1960s and 1970s (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2006). Morocco, lying in the northwestern coast of African continent, cannot be more important for its strategically geographic position. Meanwhile, Morocco, with complicated liaison with Arabian countries in culture, religion and history, was actually an important member of the Islamic world. The "Six-Day War"¹ processing in April, 1969 between the Islamic world and Israel also gave a hint of regional tension (Quigley 2012; Shemesh 2008). The background of both the global Cold War and the regional conflict in Middle East paves the way for a turmoil setting and conflicting tone in the story. Moreover, the historical background in the story highlights the political importance of Morocco in Cold War period and traps the reader's attention more easily to turn into the representational world Updike conveys in the story.

The reader may take the representational reality as the real if they do not check the real historical event closely. While if they do, they would find that the real Soviet delegation was not co-led by Podgorny and Kosygin together but led by Podgorny alone. In history, Alexei Kosygin visited Morocco in 1971 not in 1969, neither together with Nicolai Podgorny. Here, the Soviet delegation event is fictionalized in the story. This fictionalization provides not only a truer sense of reality but a conflicting historical background in the story. The protagonist and his family are set to visit Morocco at the time of Cold War conflict in the global context and military conflict in the regional context. This will change an ordinary family travel into an extraordinary political experience and leave more space for the fictional representation in the story. Meanwhile, by fictionalizing the real historical event, the gap between the outer reality and the literary representation is obscured. The readers can hardly tell when the real event ends and the literary fiction begins. Thus forms a tension between the reality and representation in the story setting, which paves the way for a further exposure for Updike's deep intention in the short story. The dual narrative dynamics will provide a better scaffold to expose Updike's writing intention in the story.

2. Surface Level of Dual Narrative Dynamics and the Family Travel

The concept of dual narrative dynamics, proposed by Dan Shen, illustrates that there may be dual narrative progressions under the plot development of a literary works, i.e., the overt narrative progression and the covert narrative progression, and the dual

¹ The "Six-Day War" between Israel and Arab world happened briefly but fiercely from June 5th to June 11th in 1967.

trajectories of signification and the complicated connection between them can be found in the literary works (Shen 2022). Shen's concept of dual narrative dynamics has been inspired by various sources in narratology, such as the notions of dynamics of the texts (Brooks 1984), the division between the implied author and the real author (Booth 1983), the "instability" and "tensions" in the narrative progression (Phelan 1987; 2007), and plot development² (Richardson 2002), and the specific phrasal construction and patterning in a narrative to arouse the narrativity and the reader's reactions such as suspense or surprise (Toolan 2007), to name just a few. The dual narrative progressions can be complimented or contradicted, depending on the writers' intension to influence readers' understanding on the story events, characters, themes or aesthetics. The dual narrative progressions will enrich the expressive power of the writings. As for "Morocco", the overt narrative progression exists in the narrative of family travel.

Travel writing in western world has taken place since the 18th century to record and depict the "movement between geographic location and cultural experiences" (Ravi 2003, 1). Travel indicates a sense of distance and the differences that the distance entails. Both the distance and differences may arouse awe and admiration in the readers, or, sometimes, may expose the insight in the writers. One of the charms of the western travel writing lies in its so claimed "authenticity" of the non-western people and cultures, which implies a comparison between "us" and "them".

This comparison between "us" and "them" can be traced back to the construction of the Other in Hegel's master-slave model. In Hegel's opinion, the construction of the Self on the side of the master is through the confirmation on the side of the slave's enslavement. Without the enslavement and recognition of the enslavement from the slave's side, the master cannot accomplish his position as master. In other words, the self-consciousness of the master depends on the slave's othering both physically and spiritually. As Hegel elaborated, "The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the servant... being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change around into the real and true independence" (Hegel 1977, 407). In spite of Hegel's inclination on the mutual dependence of master and slave, there exists an obvious inferiority on the position of the slave as the Other. Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak respectively reveal, in the background of colonialism, how the Europeans, the colonizer, constructed the colonized as the inferior Other. Bhabha argued, "The Other loses its

² In Richardson's anthology *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, five sections are contained, i.e., narrative temporality, plot, sequencing, beginnings and ends, and narrative frames. The division among the first three, especially between the plot and sequence, has been questioned. See Eyal Segal, "Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames". *Poetics Today*, Vol. 24, No.1, 2003, pp.143-144 and also see Marc Singer, "Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames". *symplokē*, Vol. 11, No. 1-2, 2003, pp.260-261. The distinction between fabula and syuzhet, or intranarrative and extranarrative sequences in the anthology does inspire a further exploration in the narrative dynamics.

power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse" (Bhabha 1994, 31), while Spivak, through her development of the concepts of "othering" and "worlding", pointed out that "the 'Colonizing Power' is far from monolithic – that its class-composition and social positionality are necessarily heterogeneous" (Spivak 1985, 254). Bhabha and Spivak intend to expound that the colonialism works through the deprivation of the indigenous people in various ways, including both the official documents to ensure the high culture of the colonialists and the everyday interaction between the colonizers and the colonized as master and servant, so as to induce the indigenous people to accept their status as the inferior Other.

The inferiority of the Other has been penetrated in the western travel writing, in which the westerners are preset as the superior ones while the non-westerners the inferior ones. In the western travel writing, the non-western world has often been demonstrated as the Orient, thus forming a binary opposition of Occident and Orient. Among the vast range of the Orient, Morocco has often been an indispensable one. That explains why Morocco continuously fascinates Europeans. Updike's fascination on Morocco lies in a different Morocco under the tourist gaze of his protagonist.

The agency of the family travel in "Morocco" is the protagonist "I", an American British, and the direct reason "I" recalls the family travel is to remember the family gathering in the good old days. The story narrates how "I" together with his wife and four children (two daughters and two sons) travel through Morocco but get unpleasant travel experiences and acknowledge at the end that the true meaning of family travel is the clinging together of the family members, having nothing to do with where to go or what to do. In spite of this, the depiction about the various Moroccans and Moroccan cities under "my" tourist gaze highly outweighs the plot of the family travel. Updike justifies the realness of the depiction of the Moroccans through "the wrong travel time" design. The family travel happens in April in the story. It is hinted that April is a wrong time for travel in Morocco for it is ahead of the best travel time. "I" attribute this fault to an ignorant British travel agent. It is the wrong travel time that leaves the protagonist a chance to see the so called "real" Morocco. Thus extends two thirds of the story on the various Moroccans and Moroccan city landscapes that the protagonist and his family witness during the travel. The family travel narrative provides the story with a convenient scheme to construct the so-called "real" Morocco under the tourist gaze. The witness of the protagonist turns Moroccans from the host to the gazed object.

Although the Moroccans under "my" gaze are differed in age, gender, occupation, and social rank, not in ethnicity because "I" cannot tell Arabs from Berbers, "I" still generalize them as "dark men in robes who frightened" "my" 8-year-old daughter. (Updike 2009, 1) Skin color is endowed with racial prejudice. As Caucasians, Moroccans in the protagonist's eye are different from the Americans because their skin color is darker, while dark skin color of the Caucasians has long

been associated with the degeneration of the Orient on the one hand, and with lower class of peasants and working labors on the other hand. In this light, groups of the Moroccans are portrayed in unpleasant way. Some of them are poor and obedient, such as the Spider-like beggar on the street or the poor men and women peasants on the bus; some are addicted to money-making, such as the little girls selling wild flowers, or the Restinga hotel manager speaking French but only with the financial calculation in mind, or the merchants in shepherds' robes in Agadir bank; others are either sensuous or mad, such as the masturbating vagrant in the Agadir public beach and the maddened Moroccan mother after losing her daughter in a traffic accident; still others are apathetic to people in the misfortunes, such as the crowds gathering after the traffic accident. The crowds in "my" eyes are those who pay every effort to overpower the crazed mother instead of the truck driver, the perpetrator in the accident, which is beyond the understanding of the western reason. Under "my" tourist gaze, Moroccans are either lack of sense or lack of sensibility. Moroccans under the protagonist's gaze are portrayed as lesser people, especially the lesser poor people. Riches, or private property becomes a hidden standard for the protagonist to judge who have the quality to gain freedom. Obviously, Moroccan people are not among those qualified.

Individual Moroccans are presented along with two types of Moroccan cities under the gaze of the protagonist, i.e., the under-constructed city and the urbanized city, both of which are differed and represented in different vehicles. It turns out in the story that, the higher the degree of urbanization of the city is, the higher the degree of privatization in vehicles the protagonist uses. The under-constructed city is connected with the bus while the urbanized city with truck, taxi and rent cars. Different vehicles in and between cities create different mobile space for the protagonist and his family to get access to various Moroccans. The bus creates a public mobile space and the truck, taxi and rent cars create a comparatively private mobile space. In the protagonist's viewpoint, the vehicles in the urbanized cities are categorizing Moroccans into a new order between the drivers and the pedestrians, with the drivers in the higher position and the pedestrians in the lower position. The traffic accident displays the new order and the individual Moroccans being twisted in the new order. In the accident, an innocent Moroccan girl is killed by a truck and the traffic is held up. As tourists, the protagonist and his family observe what happens after the accident. First, the girl's mother expresses her sadness by racing "up and down the bare slopes" of the road and "splitting the skies with her uncanny keening" (Updike 2009, 4). The racing and keening of the mother are named as "ancient modes of lamentation" as well as "the noise" that "no American could have made" (Updike 2009, 4). The juxtaposition of the ancient modes of lamentation with the noise reveals the protagonist's mixing attitude towards the Moroccan mother. On the one hand, the mother is worth of sympathy because she loses her daughter in the accident and because both she and her daughter are victimized in the driver-pedestrian new order.

On the other hand, however, the mother is barbaric because she loses her mind by being so overwhelmed in the sorrow as to twist her behaviors into unreasonable insanity. The mother's out of control becomes another evidence for the inferiority of Moroccans in the protagonist's eye. In addition, the depiction of the "clumsy" and "excited" train of people chasing the mother around furthers the sense of inferiority of Moroccans. The fact that they chase and punish the victimizing mother instead of the truck driver is to twist the traditional ethics and consolidate the driver-pedestrian new social order.

Different from the negative images of Moroccans, the images of the protagonist and his family are positive. They are strong-minded, they are reasonable and restrained. The protagonist attributes these characteristics to the fact that they are from "the free country". "The free country" indicates a political tension between the US and the monarchy Morocco. Freedom is considered to be linked with the positive characteristics of the protagonist's family while despotism is hinted to be linked with the negative characteristics of the Moroccans in the story. Thus, compared with the Moroccans, the protagonist and his children are turned into the synecdoche of the US, the representation of the so-called free country. Judith, the 14-year-old elder daughter, is in her blossom and decisive when talking "in almost a woman's voice" (Updike 2009, 5); Mark is compassionate though at the age of 12 when witnessing the dead Moroccan girl under the truck wheel; Caleb, the second son, consoles and reconciles when the family falls into disputes at the age of only 10; and Genevieve, the 8-year-old younger daughter, cares about the homeless dogs around Moroccan hotels. Except the due childishness and sibling competition, the four children of the protagonist's embody an extraordinary excellence in character of the free country's future generation. The only negative and heterogeneous aspect in the protagonist's family is in his wife, who is portrayed as a weak and sensitive woman having no decision right for the family affairs. She helps nothing but to cry when the family runs out of cash on stepping on the first Moroccan city. She is portrayed so panic and unwise that even the "navy-blue beret" on her head is "unflattering" (Updike 2009, 1). Her weakness makes the only flaw and heterogeneity in the family. It turns out, however, in the end of the story, that the protagonist divorces his wife as if to cut the only weakness and heterogeneity off the family.

On the whole, it is clear that in the post-colonialist context, the once colonized still cannot be taken as the "neighbor"-like Other (Levinas 1998)³ but as the "hell"-like Other (Sartre 1989)⁴. The protagonist never shows his will to communicate with the

³ Levinas pointed out that "It is precisely in this call to my responsibility by the face that summons me, that demands me, that claims me—it is in this questioning that the other is my neighbor", see Emmanuel Levinas. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 146.

⁴ Toward the end of Sartre's one-act drama *No Exit* the play, Garcin declares: "So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the

Moroccans. The overt family travel narrative conveys a binary contrast between the Moroccans and Americans, in which freedom eventually becomes the key standard to judge who is better. In the protagonist's mind, the reason for the twisting of Moroccans, either in group or in individual, is due to their lack of freedom. Lack of freedom becomes the original sin of Morocco in the protagonist's mind. Moroccans are represented as twisting creatures and lesser people and Moroccan cities twisting spaces. Lack of freedom as a theme in the story is closely related with the covert narrative dynamics in the story.

3. Deep Level of Dual Narrative Dynamics and Cold War

The covert narrative on Cold War is woven in a prevailing fear all through the story. From the very beginning of the story when the protagonist states his fear of the milling Moroccans, the dreadful emotion is penetrating the family travel narrative in the whole story. Fear is the psychological motivation that drives the protagonist to "flee" from one Moroccan city to another. Updike himself once said that in his fictional characters, "each face is suppressing knowledge of an immense catastrophe", (Updike 1962, 262) which is represented as fear in the character. Fear is not a negative emotion for Updike, but a force to keep the plot move on, to keep the "poor guys [characters] running" (Updike 1971, 152). At the beginning of the story, the preset fear is expressed through the protagonist's statement "We were afraid to stop" (Updike 2009, 1). The reason for the preset fear, however, never gets explained in the story. The emotional drive of fear becomes the disnarration in the story. Disnarration refers to events in a narrative that could have happened but doesn't actually happen (Prince 1992, 30). The significance of the disnarration lies that it shows the possibility of the development of events. This possibility is mediated by the four Moroccans in the story who try to get close to the protagonist: The hotel manager in Restinga, the thin dark man at the Restinga bus station who offers to talk to the protagonist in Moroccan native language, the vagrant on the public beach in Agadir and the policeman in Safi. The interaction process between the protagonist and the four Moroccans shows a clear pattern: the communication between the protagonist and the Moroccans decreases and the level of fear and physical distance increase in turn. In the process, the protagonist retains a strong sense of border and Eurocentric mindset, refusing to allow any Moroccan to undermine the distance of maintaining such a border. Just like Edward Said pointed out, "the Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached" (1978, 103). The protagonist only interacts with

'burning marl.' Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot poker. Hell is – other people!" see Jean-Paul Sartre. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. New York: Vintage International Publisher, 1989, p. 45.

Moroccans in French-speaking environment. In the context of the Cold War, the French-speaking environment belongs to the Western culture and the space of the self for the protagonist, while the local language environment in Morocco belongs to the other culture and the other space. In this way, the distance between the protagonist and the Moroccans is essentially the distance between the Western space and the non-Western space in the political background of Cold War. The mysterious fear eventually turns out to be related with a Cold War Ideology.

The visit of Soviet delegation in Rabat gives the first clue to the Cold War tension. As the protagonist tells, his family is excluded out of Rabat because of the full reservation from the Rabat hotels. Here, Rabat is becoming a political field where Soviet Union and the United States are competing with each other. This event metaphorically represents the tension between Soviet Union and the United States in the Cold War of 1960s. In 1960s, though the regional conflicts in Middle East continued to escalate, both Soviet Union and the United States had no intention to expand military conflicts. Rather, they worked on extending their political influence in the Middle East and Africa. Nearly every corner of the African continent was penetrated by the influence of either Soviet Union or United States or both. The description in the story about how Rabat is decorating itself with all the flags and banners of hammer and sickle as well as the posters of Lenin makes the Moroccan capital a metaphorically representative space of Soviet Union, while the rented Renault car functions as a temporal representative space of the United States. The two representative spaces compete with each other for influential power. Thus, the event that the protagonist's family has no space to stay in the Moroccan capital serves as political function to indicate that U.S. influential power is temporally suppressed by the Soviet Union influential power. The story, however, designs a counterbalance to Soviet temporary advantage. The capital is designed to be dominated by Soviet Union space in the story; however, the other Moroccans cities are open to the protagonist's family. The fact that they drive the rented Renault car to go through various Moroccan cities indicates the breaking of the dominance of Soviet Union and the free moving of American influential power in Morocco. The itinerary of the Renault car is like a line while Rabat overwhelmed with the Soviet flags, banners and posters is only a dot in the line. In this way, the protagonist and his U.S. representation seems to take the final victory.

In addition, the covert Cold War narrative is conveyed through some unreliable narrative technique, i.e., denarration, which disintegrates the overt narrative and presents various possibilities from the fissured narration. Denarration is a strategy of narrative negation in which "a narrator denies significant aspects of her narrative that had earlier been presented as given". (Richardson 2001, 168) This narrative strategy fundamentally changes, as Brian Richardson stated, "the nature and reception of the story" (Richardson 2001, 168). In "Morocco", the Red-Light incident in the small town of Safi has a paradoxical duality of meaning. The incident is simple.

When the protagonist with his family drives to Safi, he fails to see the red light and drives through it. After realizing that he has run a red light, he does not stop the car, even when he notices that the policeman has showed up and written down his license number. The Red-Light incident is over; however, the aftermath fear is continuous till the very end of the story. The Red-Light incident in some way perpetuates the driver's privilege in the previous discussed driver-pedestrian new order, which confirms the privilege of the driver and of the car in Morocco. Seen from another perspective, the Red-Light incident dissolves the privilege of the car, however. The protagonist's disregard for traffic rules reveals two meanings: on the one hand, as a car owner, the protagonist runs the red light as a violation of traffic rules; on the other hand, as a British-American, the protagonist runs the red light as a violation of Moroccan order. The Red-Light incident highlights the protagonist's dual privileged position as a driver and a British-American. It is the British-American identity that makes the protagonist's Red-Light incident a more political narrative of automotive power.

Right after the Red-Light incident, the story intersperses the psychological activity of the protagonist, whose main function would complicate the Red-Light incident if not seen from the perspective of Cold War. The story shifts the narrator from first person to third person here: "he had grown certain that his license-plate number was being telegraphed up and down the coast, through the network of secret police that all monarchies maintain. At any moment sirens would wail, and he would be arrested, arrested and thrust deep into the bitter truth of Morocco, which he had tried to ignore, while stealing the sun and the exotica" (Updike 2009, 6). The previous first person implies that the protagonist is the narrator, conveying a limited subjective perspective of observation. The third person at this point indicates that the protagonist is distanced from the narrator, and this distance seems to make what the present narrator says more objective and credible, and more conducive to expressing the narrator's position: The real Morocco is a monarchy full of secret police. It seems that the Red-Light incident is not the protagonist's disregard for traffic rules, but his attempt to escape from this "real" Morocco. The third-person representation of mental activity here not only justifies the Red-Light incident, but also, to some extent, dissolves the previously constructed narrative line of the driver-pedestrian order, forming a sort of denarration, i.e., the narrator's deconstruction and erasure of the previous story. From the narrator's standpoint, the tragic death of the little girl under the truck seems to presume that in the protagonist's mind, these are not solely the faults of urbanization or automobiles, but also the faults of the monarchy. The protagonist's Red-Light incident reverses the previous car power narrative into a rebellion against the monarchy; however, neither the car power narrative nor the monarchy rebellion narrative can unify the whole explicit narrative process alone, which causes instability and uncertainty in the structure of the explicit travel narrative in the story. While if introducing the Cold War tension, the instability and uncertainty caused by the denarration will become reasonable. There is some hidden

hostility between the protagonist and his representative Morocco. In 1960s, Morocco obtained the support from Soviet Union in agriculture and mining and exported agricultural goods and mineral substance to Soviet Union in return. In the Cold War background, Morocco's connection with Soviet Union equals to enmity to the United States, which is unbearable for the protagonist. That can be part of the reason why he represents Moroccans as twisted people and Morocco as a monarchy country without freedom. He wants to dwarf Morocco so as to dwarf Soviet Union since the connection between the two. The Cold War thinking pattern always haunts in the story.

Conclusion

The introduction of non-fictional narrative elements to the fictional narrative of the short story "Morocco" greatly increases the credibility and authenticity of the explicit travel narrative, making it easier for readers to accept the "real" Morocco created by Updike. Herein lies the significance of Updike's fictionalized nonfiction writing. On the one hand, it blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, between fictional truth and historical truth, highlighting the unique aesthetic effect of fictionalized non-fiction writing in the form of expression. On the other hand, the reader is also immersed in the explicit travel narrative of the story while unconsciously accepting the implicit Cold War narrative, which conceals the game of Cold War ideology and the boundary awareness of Self/Other and Occident/Orient in the uneventful family travelogue, making the work present a strong political connotation in the theme. The blurring and dissolution of boundaries, however, in the form of fictionalized nonfiction writing and the establishment of political and ethnic boundaries in content and theme constitute a contradiction. The story experiments with uncertain narrative strategies such as "denarration" and "disnarration" in an attempt to resolve this contradiction. Other possibility for the story is developed out of these narrative strategies. It turns out, however, that the various overt narrative possibilities are restricted by the covert Cold War narrative, thus, the variety of overt narratives in "Morocco" is always constrained by the Cold War ideology. While the travel narrative goes in the surface of particular reality, the underlying Cold War ideology serves as the universal representation.

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RECLAIMING QUEER TIME: QUEER TEMPORALITIES IN ALI SMITH'S "HOW TO BE BOTH"



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Abstract

This article examines the different manifestations of alternative temporalities in Ali Smith's Goldsmiths Award novel *How to be Both* (2014). My argument is that the novel 'queers' understandings of time in two significant ways: by highlighting new possibilities of narrative structure that challenge linear conceptions of time and by questioning regulated notions of developmental temporalities in terms of progression from childhood to heteronormative adulthood. Hence, by drawing on the compelling framework of queer temporalities, the main goal of this article is to analyze the mechanisms deployed by Ali Smith to generate unprecedented configurations of queer time.

Key words

queer temporalities, queer time, non-linearity, queer narrative, queer studies, LGBTQIA+ identity

Introduction¹

Ali Smith is characterized as a writer whose style is marked by playfulness and disruption. As a result, she has situated herself at the front line of the contemporary literary panorama with works such as *The Seasonal Quartet* (2021), *Artful* (2012), *The Accidental* (2005), and *Hotel World* (2001). Scholars have primarily considered Smith a postmodern author, given that her writing exhibits "linguistic self-consciousness, generic experiment, representations of time and subjectivity, and narrative construction" (Gérmana and Horton 2013, 5). *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*, published between 2001 and 2005, have been the focus of critical attention due to the combination of postmodern techniques with spectrality and hyperreality. Smith's sixth novel, *How to be Both* (2014), also encapsulates this style but represents a transcendent shift, which Sophie Gilbert interprets as an attempt to "push the themes, and the formal invention, to new extremes" (2014). This transformation takes

¹ The research for this article has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry, and Competitiveness (Ref. PRE2019-090044) as well as the research project (MINECO): "Queer Temporalities in Contemporary Anglophone Cultures".

the form of “aleatory fiction”, setting the tone for the rest of the novel: the reversible stories of the Italian Renaissance Painter Francescho del Cossa² and 21st-century teenager George challenge fixed literary assumptions by unfolding depending on the version the reader obtains.

In an interview for the Baileys women’s international prize for fiction, Ali Smith describes her experimental undertaking in *How to be Both* as a reflection of “our dualities, our multiplicities as people, how we live in time [...] and how time itself is not as sequential as we imagine” (2005). This unparalleled approach to time situates Smith among many other writers and academics within queer theory whose works “deconstruct linear time and development narratives, [...] to reconstruct and reconceptualize the present in new ways” (Haffey 2019, 8). These “development narratives”, encompassed within the interventionist project of queer temporalities, push against the dominant paradigm through which time is understood and explore how queer individuals alternatively experience politics, history, relationships, and development. Thus, as malleability and the possibility of “being both” are central themes in *How to be Both*, my intention in this essay is to complicate the novel’s critical reception as a playful, postmodern fiction by also framing it as a project that subtly queers both society’s fixation with linearity and the sequential, heteronormative temporal logics of development.

Full of “inconsistencies and breaking points in temporality” (Bennett 2018, 83), *How to be Both* is set in-between the Renaissance and the 21st century. The novel, divided into two parts, tells a story that defies time and narrative conventions in different ways. At the beginning of each section, there is a drawing of a security camera and a hand with two eyes, foreshadowing the historical period that will be adopted by each story. In my copy, the first half, “Eyes”, immerses readers in the fictionalized life story of Francescho del Cossa, who reappears as a ghost behind one of their frescoes in the 21st century in a disembodied state. After observing George contemplating one of their paintings in Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia, Francescho decides to follow her and reveal their life’s journey along the way. In “Camera”, readers meet 16-year-old George amidst a mourning process. Her mother has left her unexpectedly with her absent father and her brother. That is why George’s 21st-century life in Cambridge is just physical, as she is constantly involved in a psychic process of remembering a trip with her mother to see the frescoes of Francescho del Cossa. This memory prompts George to unearth Francescho’s past and reevaluate her fixed beliefs about life, ultimately showcasing the potentialities of “being both”.

² Francesco Del Cossa is not a fictional character, as they were a famous painter during the Enlightenment period. Nonetheless, while Smith constantly mentions some of their artworks, little is actually known about the painter. By positioning an epigraph quote in the narrative as the only historical document available to show their existence, Ali Smith imagines part of Del Cossa’s biography and adds the h to their name to emphasize its fictional aspects.

1. Ali Smith's Queer Temporalities

1.1. Time out of Joint? Queering Identity, Queering Temporalities

Freeman et al.'s argument that "queer temporality is a way of apprehending being-in-the-world that, [...], insists on a 'refusal of linear historicism'" (2007, 178) is analogous to Smith's representation of Francescho del Cossa³. Francescho's story starts with their allegorical resurrection in the 21st century, represented graphically through a spiral layout of fragmented words and sentences. Suddenly, the motion stops, and the narrative situates Francescho Del Cossa in the National Museum, looking at "a boy in front of a painting" (Smith 2014, 12) who turns out to be George. Inspired by the ambivalent identity of George, Francescho decides to embark on the task of telling their life story. Smith's use of an auto-diegetic narrator initially prevents the reader from discovering some aspects of Francescho's reality, such as their gender identity. However, after some digressions, Francescho reveals the link between George's ambiguous identity with theirs. Born female, Francescho decides to pass as a male, which illustrates a "refusal of linear historicism" and establishes a productive dialogue between the novel and the field of queer temporalities.

Nonetheless, Francescho's identity is initially established to comply with heteronormative time. In a retrospective narration of a childhood memory, Francescho describes how they developed a tendency to wear their deceased mother's clothes, and this act led their father to "orient" them toward linear structures of time:

If you agree to put these clothes away. I mean stop wearing them. [...]. And if you were to put, say, breeches on, or these leggings I've here, instead –, he said. [...] – then I can get you a job and a schooling, he said. [...] Cause maybe. Maybe. If you were to stop wearing these too-big clothes and were to wear, let's say, these boys' clothes instead. [...] If you were, he said. Then we might find someone to train you up in the making and using of colours on Wood and on walls, you being so good with your pictures (Smith 2014, 35-36).

Not only are short-lived Francescho's chances to honor their mother but also to evade heteronormativity. Francescho's father, recognizing Francescho's talent for painting, tries to align Francescho with the markers that directly correlate with manly heterosexuality to provide them with a career in painting. Yet, the change would only be complete if Francescho works with their father and brothers to be established by society as a man: "when it is clearly established in others' eyes as to who you have *become* [...] we will get you into a painters' workshop" (Smith 2014, 37). As the story progresses, this act of gender performativity is achieved since people unquestioningly

³ I have opted to use the pronoun 'their' to refer to Francescho. While Ali Smith does not explicitly assign a pronoun to this character, I consider 'they/them' as the most appropriate way of referring to this character given the nature of their gender identity and how it is treated in the novel.

accept Francescho as a man regardless of their physiological attributes. Thus, Francescho is positioned as an individual who conforms to both the hegemonic institutions that enforce compulsory heterosexuality and the constraints of linear time in order to achieve success in life.

The prospects of Francescho's life seem to fit within a productivity ideal rooted in heteronormative norms. In an attempt to "synchronize" Francescho's lifetime with those who enjoyed a better present during the 15th century, their father actively distances them from femininity. Consequently, Francescho becomes enmeshed in what Elizabeth Freeman describes as chrononormativity. This concept refers to the dominant organization of time and bodies for maximum productivity which only recognizes those bodies who adhere to society's regulatory norms (Freeman 2010, 3). In accordance with the mechanisms of chrononormativity, Francescho can only be deemed as a "productive" individual in the 15th century if they present themselves as a male painter. That is why the novel represents how, once the protagonist assumes the identity of Francescho through cross-dressing, they gain access to education in painting and eventually secure a place to work in Ferrara's Palazzo. In this sense, the social acceptance of Francescho as a painter exemplifies how conforming to chrononormativity leads to a social approval based on the "[...] notions of the normal" imposed by the "[...] middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam 2005, 4).

The novel begins to problematize heteronormative time schemes when Francescho's assigned sex at birth is discovered. This takes place when Barto, Francescho's colleague, feels ashamed upon learning this fact: "[...] Barto had been challenged by someone, concerning me, and he had been humiliated by the challenge. You are other than I thought, he said. I nodded" (Smith 2014, 95). As I have said elsewhere, operating under the regimes of "chrononormativity" only makes certain ways of living legible since these regimes are rooted in the cultural realm of normativity. Consequently, upon this revelation, Francescho would irremediably situate themselves in an "a-synchronous" relation to the preferred social mechanisms of 15th-century society. This idea begins to gain deeper meaning shortly after this finding when Francescho admits that "[...] there are certain things that, said out loud, will change the hues of the picture" (Smith 2014, 95). Revealing their gender identity could lead to prosecution for cross-dressing, lower payment for their paintings, and perhaps most importantly, lose their well-deserved status as an Italian artist. However, Francescho decides to turn away from their future-oriented chrononormativity in favor of queer time since, as they hold, "the general acceptance of [their] painter self, had always meant I'd be left to be exactly that-[themselves]" (Smith 2014, 95).

From this moment on, the novel engages in a description of how Francescho resisted heteronormative, linear narratives after their self-proclamation. Although opposing to 15th century heteronormative social norms would have left a traumatic imprint on Francescho, Francescho's emancipation from the constraints of straight time potentially refuses this dictum: "[...] cause although it seemed to be the end of the

world to me – it wasn't. There was a lot more world: cause roads that look set to take you in one direction will sometimes twist back on themselves without ever seeming anything other than straight" (Smith 2014, 98). Instead of abiding by heteronormative power structures, Francescho embraces the "twist" of queer temporalities, finding social agency in being their "[own] particular both" (Smith 2014, 54). This is reflected when, after an impasse, Francescho is again commissioned to work for Mr. Priciano of Ferrara and even pursues sexual encounters with men who understand their fluid identity. Moreover, Francescho successfully manages to bypass the "[...] the markers of life experience, namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam 2005, 2). The painter neither marries nor has descendants, even when the novel subtly suggests their romantic relationship with Barto. With these events, Smith depicts Francescho's destabilization of chrononormativity not only as a subversive way of resisting straight time but also as an appraisal of a life "[...] unscripted by conventions" (Halberstam 2005, 2).

Moreover, Smith reimagines a space for lives "unscripted by conventions" in the 15th century by engaging with Francescho's art production after their queer self-proclamation. In doing so, her undertaking can be interpreted as an effort to illuminate alternatives for queer-identified subjects, envisioning a future outside of "the narrative coherence" (Halberstam 2005, 2) of heteronormativity. Although discovered by Mr. Priciano de Ferrara's workshop workers, who "let [Francescho] know they knew [their] reputation" (Smith 2014, 107), Francescho chooses to use art as a celebration of their out-of-synch existence. Through the premise that "the life of a painting and making is a matter of double knowledge" (Smith 2014, 128), Francescho's artworks begin to tap into non-binarity and fluidity through dual interpretations. Reflecting on the paintings of Alberti, Francescho questions why "it would not be suitable to dress Venus or Minerva in the rough wool cloak of a soldier" and reinterprets myths such as that of Apollo and Marsyas, portraying the latter as a "travesty" (Smith 2014, 92). This perspective aligns with Fatma Bilge and Holly Ranger's argument that images, artworks, and stories within Smith's narrative conceal double meanings that hint at an in-between position in light of society's rigid dichotomies (2019, 117-118; 2019, 414). By using queerness as a common motif of Francescho's life and artworks, Smith envisions a future for queer bodies that would otherwise be "destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear" (Foucault 2000, 161).

1.2. "To Tell it in more than One Way" and still, Tell it Right: Ali Smith's Queer Narrative

If Francescho's section is notable for deconstructing the binaries of heteronormative time, "Camera" outstands for loosening the strictures of fixed narratives in favor of queer temporalities. At the beginning of "Camera," we encounter 16-year-old George mourning her mother, who unexpectedly passed away four months earlier. The story

unfolds during New Year's Eve of 2013 in George's home, which is pervaded by a disturbing atmosphere: her father is coping with the pain of losing his wife through alcohol, and her little brother remains oblivious to the situation. Throughout the narrative, an extradiegetic narrator describes George's struggles to come to terms with Carol's death and how this leads her to engage in "a simultaneous combination of a retrospective and a simultaneous present" (Huber 2016, 98). The novel primarily illustrates this combination through the interweaving of flashbacks with present events. For instance, while George befriends Helena Fisker, she also recollects memories from a family's trip to Ferrara, where they saw Francescho del Cossa's frescoes. This narrative structure, which aligns with Freccero's argument that queer temporalities disrupt "the past-present-future march of time" (2015, 22), invites comparison with queer understandings of time.

The introduction of Francescho Del Cossa in "Camera" initiates a nuanced exploration of time and identity through the asynchronous relationship that both protagonists develop. Early in the narrative, George recounts how her mother encouraged her to scrutinize artworks and stories for hidden meanings and interpretations. A pivotal moment occurs during their visit to Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara when they play "what's-the-point-of-art game" (Smith 2014, 228). Carol tries to instruct George about the importance of refusing either/or explanations by emphasizing the ambiguity within Francescho's painting, which depicts a figure that could be either a young man or a young woman dressed in rich clothing. Unknowingly, George begins to question time and identity, pondering: "Is it happening now or in the past? [...] Is the artist a woman or a man?" (Smith 2014, 191). Although the discussion of Francescho's identity in what seems like an ordinary conversation may seem insignificant, it shows how George's mother creates what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as a queer asynchrony. Queer asynchrony occurs when there is a "collision of different time frames or temporal systems" (2012, 5), like Francescho's 15th-century temporality clashing with George's temporality in the present. Dinshaw further asserts that this asynchronicity leads to a new configuration of the present that is far from static (Freeman et al. 2007, 185). In the case of "Camera," this translates into the a-temporal and somewhat co-causal relation between Francescho and George, which suspends the present and how it is narrated as the novel advances.

By contrast, George rejects the "fluid" nature of the present, favoring fixed heteronormative structures of time at first. Further delving into the conversation about Francescho's identity, George describes her refusal to accept the possibility of dual interpretations, bluntly asserting that "It can't be both. It must be one or the other. [...]AUGH" (Smith 2014, 191). Despite Carol's efforts to underscore that these rigid either/or notions are arbitrary constructs enforced by heteronormativity, George remains resistant to embrace this particular outlook. George is determined to perceive the present world for what it is without searching for hidden meanings.

Following Lee Edelman, George's behavior is a result of society's obsession with viewing every aspect in a periodic order imposed by time's continuity. Therefore, in Edelman's words, George intrinsically has a "[...] familiar demand for narrative accountings of "how and why" (Freeman et al. 2007, 180). This periodic order even shapes George's opinion on textual linearity, as she is unable to accept the concurrence of multiple timelines: "if things really did happen simultaneously, it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable" (Smith 2014, 194).

George's derangement of synchronicity begins when she meets her classmate, Helena Fisker (H). H enters the narrative unexpectedly by reaching out to George on the night of the 1st of January. Although George and H did not have a strong friendship then, she tried to cheer George, making her "laugh in an undeniable present tense" (Smith 2014, 260). In the following months, George and H become inseparable, for the latter becomes a pivotal figure in George's grieving process. As Sonya Andermahr signals, George is a figure in transit who, apart from being amidst a process of healing, "[...] is between the states of child and adult, between girl and boy in terms of identification and desire [...]" (2018, 14). Partly because of her intermedial state, George has to construct a sense of self without subject positions to reflect on. Therefore, George's connection with H aids her in overcoming the ordeal caused by the absence of her mother and dismantling her preconceived ideas about life values, identity, and her place in the world.

As the relationship between George and H becomes more intimate, the narrative entertains the possibility that more than one story is simultaneously happening. This complexity becomes apparent when George introduces H to the paintings of Francescho del Cossa. Together, they explore the ambivalent meanings of the myths depicted in Francescho's frescoes, such as the one of Phaethon and the sun chariot. In "Eyes", Francescho recalls a childhood memory in which their mother, in an intimate moment, tells them the myth: "she held me on her knee after my bath and told me the terrifying stories like the one about the boy whose father, Apollo the sun-god, forbade him from driving the horses who drew the sun across the sky" (Smith 2014, 66). Inspired by this memory, Francescho creates an artwork that reinterprets this scene. In what may be understood as happening concurrently, H takes George in a shopping cart, imagining that they are "chariot-driving" (Smith 2015, 265), and they perform their particular version of the Phaethon myth: "The next thing George knows is the way she's forced backwards by a forward shove so strong that for a moment it's like she's going in two directions at once" (Smith 2015, 267). Contrary to George's previous arguments against simultaneity, when she is with H, she frequently shifts between past and present, creating a narrative superimposed by multiple stories and time frames.

The potential possibility of George's engagement with asynchronicity may be worked out more thoroughly when she and H join to do a school project. Following a brainstorming session, they decide to focus on the enigmatic figure of Francescho del Cossa for their assignment on empathy. Despite H's discovery that "[...] very little is known about him" (Smith 2014, 314), they contemplate the idea of illuminating Francescho's life through a careful study of their artworks. H and George are particularly captivated by three unknown paintings characterized by double meanings and subtle queer symbols: "It can just be rocks and landscape if that's what you want it to be – but there's always more to see if you look" (Smith 2014, 321). As George develops her interpretations of Francescho's paintings, the painter begins to embody a role that resonates with Elizabeth Freeman's concept of temporal drag. Freeman defines temporal drag as "the pull of the past on the present" through elements/acts/individuals that have been overlooked in forward-thinking (Freeman 2010, 62). By dissecting gaps and inaccuracies in Francescho's artworks, George attains self-determination and turns the temporal drag figure of Francescho into a "point of retrospective identification" (Freeman 2010, 67):

Now when she comes into Room 55, it's weird, but it's like she is meeting an old friend, albeit one who won't look her in the eye because the saint is always looking off to the side. But that's good too. It's good, to be seen past, as if you're not the only one, as if everything isn't happening just to you. Because you're not. And it isn't (Smith 2014, 335).

This quote, which describes George's interpretation of Francescho del Cossa's St Vicent of Ferrer, reveals a complete rupture of sequential time. George realizes that she cannot deny the pulling presence of the past, as she identifies herself in this Renaissance painting. In other words, George inevitably recognizes her gender-non-conforming identity by identifying with the figures depicted in Francescho's frescoes. Therefore, George's cross-temporal identification affiliates her identity and that of Francescho across time (Freeman 2022).

According to Irmtraud Huber, this section's employment of entangled temporalities tries to depict that "events and narratives can be past and present and even future all at the same time" (2016, 99). As previously noted, "Camera" shows how linearity can be interrupted through George's iterations of Francescho's queer past. After George embraces queer asynchronicity, however, the narrative mode changes to illuminate how the future can also suspend the present. This idea is represented when H moves to Denmark because of her father's job, and they have to maintain contact through text messages. Instead of keeping a usual teenage conversation, H sends George facts about Francescho del Cossa. Although George does not reply to H for days, H continues to reach out with texts in Latin and songs that make George realize that "H is trying to find a language that will make personal sense to George's ears" (Smith 2014, 346). Suddenly, there is a narrative shift from analepsis to

prolepsis, as verbs are conjugated in the future tense when George realizes that there is more than friendship between them: “halfway through writing this e-mail George noticed that she’d used, in its first sentence, the future tense, like there might be such a thing as a future” (Smith 2014, 350). In this respect, George’s subtle queer self-identification allows her to envision a future that ruptures traditional narrative structures, revealing new narrative modes for storytelling.

When George visits the National Gallery in London near the end of the narrative, prolepses become even more evident. Suddenly, the narrator switches from using the present tense through a prolepsis to foreshadow George’s near future before returning quickly to the present tense when George is seated in front of Francescho’s portrait. This interruption resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of “the queer moment.” Unlike other queer scholars such as Dinshaw, Freccero, and Freeman, who investigate the potentialities of the past in the present, Sedgwick’s queer moment extends into the future, for it is “continuing” and “extinguishable” (Sedgwick 1993, xii). Although Sedgwick uses queer moments to define disruptions in heteronormative developmental stages, Barber and Clark argue that these moments also illustrate how the present tense can be projected into an unknown future, creating a sense of continuity (2002, 19). Barber and Clark’s interpretation of the “queer moment” clarifies the narrator’s sudden shift to the future tense, announcing George’s upcoming experience: George will see Lisa Goliard, her mother’s former lover, standing in front of Del Cossa’s paintings in the National Gallery, George will follow her, and although “she will have no idea what to do next or even where she is in London anymore” every time she will come back to London, she will take pictures “in honour of her mother’s eyes [...]” (Smith 2014, 360-361). However, nothing of the above has yet transpired: “For now, in the present tense, George sits in the gallery and looks at one of the old paintings on the wall. It’s definitely something to do. For the foreseeable” (Smith 2014, 362). This open ending presents quite a strange temporality in which the dichotomy of present/future is dissolved for a moment, manifesting George’s belief in an ambiguous queer future.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* holds significant potential to contest traditional notions of linear time. Significantly, the novel engages with the “turn towards time” (Freeman 2010, 117) prompted by the field of queer temporalities. Through the novel’s reversed halves, Ali Smith interweaves two queer narratives that disrupt the conventions of heteronormative time and favor the potentialities of alternative time frames. In “Eyes,” Smith depicts the workings of chrononormativity during the Renaissance period, where individuals were expected to adhere to a predetermined forward-moving trajectory. This societal expectation is exemplified in the character of Francescho who is born female but must cross-dress themselves

as male to fit into the constraints of straight time. However, Francescho's acceptance of their fluid identity indicates a potential reclamation of queer time in the novel. This lack of temporal conformity still gives Francescho a sense of agency on a social level. Smith's celebration of out-of-synch existence is also evident in Del Cossa's artworks, as they trace the existence of queer identities back to the 15th century by challenging hegemonic depictions of gender in their myths. In the other half of the novel, "Camera", Smith explores queer relational possibilities through time. George's mother's creation of a queer asynchronicity connects the protagonist's timeline with that of Del Cossa. This manipulation of linear narratives foregrounds two implications. Firstly, it brings to the fore how the figure of the temporal drag can be deployed in the present to foster a sense of queer identification. By carefully dissecting the multiple layers of meaning within Francescho's paintings, George constructs a new interpretation of her identity. Secondly, and more importantly, it evinces that looking backwards also holds the possibility of a queer future. In this sense, due to the complication of linear time at many levels, *How to be Both* can be read as a text that creates a queer configuration of time, one that responds to queer temporalities' invitation to rethink time constructions in less restrictive and more liberating ways.

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THE SPECTACLE OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA ON BLACK BODIES IN AMERICA: SUBJECTIVITY, ABJECTION, AND COMMODIFICATION OF THE WHITE/BLACK GAZE



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Abstract

In 1994 Elizabeth Alexander's "Can you be Black and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" was published in *The New Yorker* magazine. Alexander focuses on the ways in which Black bodies have been the focal point of public pain, torture, and humiliation for centuries. These public lynchings, whippings, and other forms of physical abuse leading to maiming and death have been elements central to the entertainment for the racial status quo. Alexander's essay also focuses on the ways in which there has always been a "Black gaze" bearing witness to the decimation of other Black bodies – the legacy of which leads to a continued cycle of both psychological and historic trauma that is (re)visited over and over again. Of course, with the prevalence of technology now a norm, such incidents of recorded violence are part of life in America. As the United States' greatest cancer, racism, continues to be a root cause of this violence, neither the killing of Blacks nor survivors' consciousness will be healed; and worse, the spectacle of racial violence will continue to perpetuate victims on various levels: 1) as victims directly tied to such violence and 2) as witnesses to said violence. My proposed essay focuses on the tragedy of Black bodies as spectacles of public pain--whether they are viewed as victims, as specimens of morbid curiosity, or as receptacles of displaced hate and disgust; and even as supposed rightly displays of justices incurred, simply because the body in question is Black ("They got what they deserved. They should have just pulled over"). I will focus on various, very public historical and modern-day lynchings, from Emmett Till to George Floyd, and explore the cause and effects against Blacks in America. Ultimately, the essay poses the following questions: who is the monster, who are the victims? And at what cost will this continuum perpetuate the legacy of trauma of the American Black population?

Key words

black/white gaze, racism, abjection, objectification, psychic trauma

Introduction

Lynching is defined as extrajudicial punishment without due process, and although there are variations on the process, it has followed a basic pattern in the United States. First, the person to be lynched is almost always a minoritized person who

represents the inherent propensity of Othered identities for lawlessness, which is attributed to the *entire* Black, Latino, Asian, or Othered race. Second, the lynched person represents what happens whenever the racial social order is transgressed; and third, they represent the purging of toxicity from the purity of racial whiteness. To white America, especially to whites living in the southern US, lynching has been considered a good thing. This is why lynch mobs are memorialized in photos as joyous, and lynchings have been considered family-oriented affairs.

Although this gruesome form of justice was horrific and macabre, the prevailing mood at lynchings themselves was not solemnity or horror because lynching solidified white racial hierarchy as lawful, even God-given. Lynching functions as a sociopolitical control mechanism operating on the premise of terror and fear, ensuring the perpetuation of the white, superior social order. Lynchings therefore do not just constitute extrajudicial punishment for crimes committed. Real or not, these public executions transcend the supposed crime, and they function as a form of racist and perverted symbolic justice meant to safeguard and ensure the greater good of white society; that is, to ensure that the racial status quo elevated whiteness.

As heinous as this crime is, America has never atoned for its sins against members of its own. Never.

In 1963, one year before the Civil Rights Act was passed, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. compared the Declaration of Independence to a bounced check marked “insufficient funds,” because although there were waves of positive federal policy changes, many non-white Americans could not participate in the protection these laws offered. The US should have begun to overhaul its principles and practices, wholly negating the twisted interpretation of the 14th Amendment as allowing “separate but equal” public facilities and sanctioning states that continued to misinterpret this Reconstruction-era amendment as one supposedly reflecting a truly egalitarian society. Instead, lynchings continued as a form of extrajudicial punishment without due process. In fact, lynchings in the United States have never really stopped.

Trees, lamp posts, nooses, and newspaper stories have been replaced by police chases, bullets in backs, and the slick treatment of Black death in popular culture. If racism, Jim Crow, and lynching are so horrific, if the psychopathology of Black America is historically and fragile depending on such variants as the capability of handling life-course trauma burdens, why then is the spectacle of the torture of Black bodies still projected in various public venues including social media, the news, and film, reaching an audience of not thousands, but millions worldwide?

Perhaps the answer lies in the causal connection inherent in the abjection of Blackness, which is firmly rooted in systemic racism and color-blind racial ideology, both of which directly contribute to the inability of understanding Otherness; that is, minority consciousness. This problem simultaneously ascribes a lower hierarchy to

those existing in the racial and cultural periphery of the racial status quo. Whether the lack of empathy is intentional or not, the result is the same: Black pain and psychic trauma are either misunderstood or wholly negated and nonchalantly dismissed. This phenomenological removal allows for the abjection of Blackness; as Fanon argues in *Black Skin, Black Masks*, “to be black is to have been blackened” (qtd. in Scott 2010, 38). In other words, it is easier to destroy something you don’t understand, than something you understand completely.

1. Objectification and the White/Black Gaze

In 1995, philosopher Martha Nussbaum published an article quite simply titled “Objectification”. The basic meaning of the word is not at issue; she defines it as “the seeing and/or treating of someone as an object” (Nussbaum 1995, 256). Rather, Nussbaum expands upon its denotative definition, exploring seven distinctions within this basic concept:

- Denial of autonomy – treating the person as lacking in autonomy or self-determination;
- Inertness – treating the person as lacking in agency or ability to act;
- Fungibility – treating the person as interchangeable with (other) objects;
- Violability – treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity and thus violable, “as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into”;
- Ownership – treating the person as though they can be owned, bought, or sold (as in slavery);
- Denial of subjectivity – treating the person as though there is no need to be concerned about their experiences or feelings.

Nussbaum further problematizes “objectivity” by applying the notions of both circumstance and context, which, she argues, complicates the intrinsic value of the word as a negative connotation but also, depending on context, as a positive one—though regardless of its contextual interpretation, the term “objectification” is nevertheless still “morally problematic” (Nussbaum 1995, 251). It is at this juncture where I will explore just how “morally problematic” the act of objectification is when contexts and circumstances reflect the torture, murder, and infotainment value of the public, psychic, and physical torture of Black bodies today.

Registering one’s place in the social and cultural milieu, that is, comparing and contrasting yourself to others around you, is a common method of understanding the self. Here, we have the notion of the object and subject, where “subject” infers agency and autonomy and “object” infers the opposite; one might even call it disenfranchisement, since that is the absence, or a weakened or threatened state, of agency or autonomy. In feminist studies, when women’s bodies are sexualized, when the *mise en scène* is tailored for men’s consumption, the phenomenon is referred to as the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). This is especially so when mutual exclusivity

normalizes the paradigm, such as when women's breasts cannot be regarded as both utilitarian and sexually desirable at the same time because objectifying women's bodies as sexual objects is normative.

The mechanics of the male gaze assert women as the passive-object and men as the active-possessor of this gaze. In short, as Laura Mulvey has stated: men *watch* women. Autonomy and thus power and agency rests with the watcher, not with the entity being watched. The corresponding process of racial objectification takes place via the white gaze, where Black trauma is innocently characterized as reportable news (the latest murder of Black male youth), or justified actions by law enforcement (he shouldn't have run), or simply as entertainment (*12 Years a Slave*). Racial objectification is then decoded by the Black gaze as a continuation of racist protocols. As with the male gaze, where disenfranchisement is accorded to who or what is being objectified or *watched*, in a country built on the backs of racialized Others, the white gaze asserts power and control over the Black gaze, and the resulting narrative is at best skewed and misunderstood. In its worst form, it is traumatic, racist, and oppressive.

2. The Spectacle of Black Trauma

The conversation regarding the spectacle of Black trauma is not new. Elizabeth Alexander's "Can you be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)", published in 1994 in *New Yorker* magazine, shows how Black bodies have been a focal point of public pain, torture, and humiliation for centuries. Public lynchings, whippings, and other forms of physical abuse and the degradation of Black America have been central to White-centered public entertainment since the early 19th and 20th centuries. But the fact that there has always been a Black gaze bearing witness to the decimation of other Black bodies, means that there is a continued cycle of both psychological and historic trauma that is (re)visited over and over again. This confounding legacy for Black Americans is especially troubling with the prevalence and instantaneous nature of today's technology. Such incidents of recorded and repeated violence are part of popular culture in America. The Black gaze continues to function as a site of Black trauma—as object, not subject, the effect of which can widen the already present racial divide.

In one regard it could be argued that news outlets are just doing their job—reporting the news—but when the focus is the epidemic of the killing of Black Americans by police, no remedies are offered to address the problem, and the narrative never changes, the resulting trauma to audiences most intimately able to connect to the story, that is, other Black Americans, is never-ending.

3. Mamie Till-Mobley

But what about instances where the depiction of Black trauma the Black gaze controls the story, where the Black consciousness is primary and not secondary? This is what happened when Mamie Till-Mobley's young son, Emmett Till, was lynched in 1955 in Mississippi by two white men for supposedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman.

Till-Mobley held an open casket funeral to "show the world what they had done to [her] son". She actively chose to make an example of her son's murder, to show the inhumanity of lynching. Her actions highlight the subjectivity of the Black gaze; that is, the narrative is controlled by the persecuted, not the prosecution. The distinction lies in how contextual meaning is dictated, to whom, and why. Till-Mobley invited thousands of people to bear witness to how her young son suffered horribly and unjustly, and she succeeded in educating others about the effects of racial disparities in America.

In contrast, many years later, in 1994, Till-Mobley, with Christopher Benson, wrote *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. The book recounts how Benson was invited to listen in while Roy Bryant, one of the white men charged and tried for Emmett Till's murder, was interviewed on *Soundprint*, one of America's longest running documentary series on National Public Radio. In stark contrast to the exegesis of Till-Mobley's narrative, Bryant, the husband of Carolyn Bryant, makes himself a victim, blaming Emmett Till for the grief he suffered since his acquittal in September, 1955. Bryant actually claimed Emmett Till ruined *his* life. He said, "Emmett Till is dead. I don't know why he can't just stay dead. Let that goddamn stuff die." When pushed further, Bryant said that if he had the chance to do it all over again, he would (Till-Mobley, 1994, 261). Bryant's rhetoric affirms the machinations of the white gaze once it is threatened – the propensity to engage in white victimhood, express the desire to stop living in the past, and blame those living in the cultural periphery for every misfortune in their lives.

When the subjectivity of the Black experience is objectified Black people are denied self-determination and perceived as lacking in agency, treating the person as interchangeable and expendable, and rendering them inert and inhuman. This necessitates a more careful critical analysis of how the Black gaze is interpreted, by whom and why, such as when another lynching took place in America: this time, that of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was fatally shot in 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

The "Hands up. Don't shoot" trope quickly gained momentum, as witnesses claimed Brown indeed had his hands up but was nonetheless shot a total of six times. News channels around the world carried the story. In many of these accounts, Brown's body, lying on the pavement, blood trailing from underneath him, was shown. It was easy to get photographs or video footage of the crime scene since

Michael Brown's body was left on Canfield Drive in Ferguson for over four hours. The incident brought on political unrest pointing to the questionable use of deadly force and police insensitivity. Further furor was ignited when Wilson was found not guilty by a Missouri grand jury.

When George Floyd was slowly murdered in 2020 by Derek Chauvin, a white officer on the Minneapolis police force, audiences worldwide heard the fear and panic in Floyd's voice as he lay dying in the street. We heard him cry out, "I can't breathe" multiple times, and then as his death grew near, we heard him call out "Mama", as he was slowly asphyxiated by Chauvin, who very calmly, very firmly kept a knee on Floyd's neck and back for over nine minutes until he died. These public lynchings are not just news stories; they are ongoing recapitulations of America's race problem.

4. And Now for *Them*

If one seeks respite from the bombardment of visuals regarding the objectification, abjection, and commodification of the Black gaze by looking at streaming, online entertainment, it will not be found in Amazon Prime's horror series, *Them*.

The series premiered in April 2021 and was highly anticipated by critics and audiences, but it received mixed reviews. It focuses on a Black family, the Emorys, who are part of the Great Migration that took place in the US between 1910 and 1970, when approximately 6 million African-Americans left the Jim Crow South in hopes of better lives elsewhere. The Emorys relocate to Compton, California, which was at the time a very white, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. As the family drives past neat, pastel-colored houses, all variations of the ranch-style architectural plan popular at mid-century, the white gaze is immediately upon them. The Emorys are being watched with great suspicion—surveilled, in fact.

The white gaze culminates in the eyes of their across-the-street neighbor, Betty Wendell. She watches with incredulity and in disgust as the Emorys exit their vehicle to admire their new home before her attention is drawn to a small tear in the perfectly clean, neat wallpaper lining her living room. As she fingers the torn fabric, the metaphor is clear; the fabric of Betty's pristinely white, neat, tidy neighborhood is ripping at the seams. And at once we are made to understand that the Emorys are to blame for the decline of utopian white suburbia.

In another scene, the patriarch of the Emory family, Henry, is repeatedly infantilized and degraded by his white boss, Mr. Berks. Henry knows he must keep quiet and be respectful even as his boss spews a toxic mix of compliments and insults. But the relationship is not a conventional boss-employee relationship because the issue of race uniquely complicates their tenuous hierarchy. Henry must withstand the abuse his boss hurls at him, and although he mostly succeeds in holding his

tongue and thus, his job, his repeated near-altercations with Mr. Berks begin to weaken Henry's fortitude and positive attitude toward work.

During one tongue-lashing, we see Henry ball his hands into fists so tightly that his fingernails cut into his palms, making him bleed. Henry then retreats to the restroom and removes disposable paper towels from the dispenser on a wall, many more than he needs to dry his hands. He enters an empty stall and screams loud and long, almost wailing into the large wad of paper napkins. It is a visceral release of the frustration, anger, and humiliation he has suffered. Crippled by self-doubt, he begins questioning his place as the only Black engineer in the firm, as well as his role as husband, father, and protector of a Black family living in a white neighborhood in 1953.

Each of the characters, Black or white, become versions of their worst selves. Henry, for example, is intelligent, an excellent family fiduciary, and loving husband and father; but a supernatural presence, known only as Tap Dance Man, ghoulishly fashioned after Jim Crow, taunts Henry, making him doubt his life choices, and encourages him to fight back against his white boss, lest Henry's inaction transforms Henry *into* Jim Crow. It is here where the commodification and objectification of the Black gaze manifests as a result of this racist imagery. After Reconstruction in the 1870s, when legislature was no longer occupied by carpetbaggers, Jim Crow replaced slavery as an "overarching racial caste system of legalized discrimination" (Carter et al., 2018). Jim Crow was not only "legalized discrimination", it was also a living metaphor, a way of life for Blacks. Jim Crow, the caricature, existed in many forms: the Brute, the Tom, the Savage, the Coon, and the Picaninny to name a few, but all existed as a manifestation of anti-Black racism. Therefore, to suggest that Henry might manifest into a modern-day embodiment of one of the versions of Jim Crow, is to painfully manipulate and twist the Black gaze.

Two episodes, titled "Covenant I" and "Covenant II" focus on the origins of the subject/object paradigm and thus the establishment of the hierarchical racial divide. "Covenant I" (incidentally, the only episode directed by a woman and woman of color, Janzica Bravo) illustrates the cruel precariousness of life for Blacks in America in the 50s. It begins by establishing the white gaze as the entity in control, and the Black gaze at its mercy: three white individuals come across the Emory's homestead when Henry Emory and their two children are not home, leaving Lucky Emory (Henry's wife) and Chester, their infant son home alone.

These three strangers invade the Emory home in broad daylight – a metaphor representing how Black bodies are violable, lacking in boundary integrity. The episode is infamous for an extremely disturbing scene involving Lucky being raped while the other intruders play "Cat in the Bag", a take on the children's game Hot Potato, with Chester, the Emorys' infant son as the "cat" or "potato". Lucky watches, helplessly, as her baby is violently tossed from one white intruder to the next until the baby dies.

“Covenant II” asserts that a misinterpretation of the Bible is the genesis of racism. The episode is gory and violent, with disturbing imagery of lynching and immolation, imagery reminiscent of actual historical events. In these scenes, African-American victims are subjected to inhumane, viciously cruel barbarism, seemingly without reason other than to visually (re)perform Black degradation for the sake of entertaining white audiences.

The series *Them*, like the neverending news stories on social media about the public lynching of Black America by police officers, relies on the white gaze while subverting Black consciousness and trapping it in the historic trauma of racism. They showcase this trauma for profit only. They each rely on an audience that appreciates horror and sensationalism, an audience able to separate itself from the characters that should be receiving their empathy. Black consciousness suffers insult after injury repeatedly without deep, complex, or politically relevant commentary.

Conclusion

Focusing on crimes committed against Black consciousness sans resolution or failing to demonstrate the causal connections between violence and the mechanics of racism make racism normative and therefore invisible. The invisibility of this audiovisual formula for garnering viewers and ratings makes it especially troubling. Although racist incidents are fleeting on celluloid, the Black gaze is mired in a history of trauma and series like *Them* perpetuate that trauma.

Struggling to survive under the white gaze without either access to recourse or the ability to flip the historic narrative, the Black gaze remains precarious, and the racial status quo retains its footing. *Them*, like news stories sensationalizing modern-day lynchings of Black Americans, offers no new narrative, no positive (even if fantastical) revisionist history. Perhaps the series received mixed reviews because audiences found its commodification of the Black gaze problematic. And like the Amazon series, news stories about the modern-day lynching of Black America without meaningful commentary, leaves the insightful, more conscientious part of the American public asking, “What the hell is the point?”

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