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JLIC – Issue 7.2 (2022)



Journal for Literary & Intermedial Crossings

Issue edited by:

Janine Hauthal, Mathias Meert, Ann Peeters and Hannah Van Hove

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

JLIC is the journal of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC)  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel



# Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: <https://clic.research.vub.be/journal>

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## Introduction

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**Issue:** 7.2

**Published:** Autumn 2022

**To link this article:** <https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-7-issue-2-2022>

**To cite this article:** Hauthal, Janine, et al. "Introduction." *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol., 7 no. 2, 2022, pp. a1-8.



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## Introduction

Janine HAUTHAL, Mathias MEERT, Ann PEETERS and Hannah VAN HOVE

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

This issue of the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* showcases five articles selected through an open call, as well as an interview with Brussels-based Eritrean-Ethiopian-British author Sulaiman Addonia. Collected together, these contributions highlight the journal's focus on various aesthetic 'crossings' concerning media, genres and spaces across diverse time periods and subject matters. Engaging with and illustrating some of the core themes of the journal, each of the articles and interview explore literary, critical and intermedial phenomena from different methodological angles, employing and discussing a wide range of approaches including autofiction, queer, intermedial, visual, film and genre studies. While the first two articles (Cominetti and Edmeades) have in common a focus on autofiction in novel and essay form, the latter three articles branch out to non-textual media, including photography (Zelnick and Engelskircher), music (Engelskircher) and film (Friedman). The closing interview with Addonia delves into the crossing of cultural, geographical and genre-related borders and boundaries in a discussion of the author's writing process and his thoughts on the classification of fiction.

In the opening article, "In Between Wor(l)ds: Feminist Autofiction and Post/colonial Identity in Marie Cardinal's *Au pays de mes racines* and Marguerite Duras's *L'amant*", **Enrica Aurora Cominetti** (University of Guelph, Canada) investigates how the hybrid genre of autofiction functions as a feminist tool of representation in the two novels. The article suggests that, respectively, *Au pays de mes racines* (1980) and *L'amant* (1984), when it comes to the

presentation of adult recollections of childhood memories of former colonies such as Algeria and Indochina, portray their narrators as female subjects who find themselves in a liminal space, split between two *words* and two *worlds*: the colony and the metropole. This in-betweenness is reflected in both novels' form and content and, Cominetti suggests, underlies the genre of autofiction itself. The article starts out by tracing the history of the term "autofiction", coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 and heavily contested since, and explores the genre's relationship to feminism. Suggesting that autofiction lends itself to experimentation with new modes of expression of women's experiences, the author gestures towards its political potential in being able to put forward alternative approaches to the portrayal of women's subjectivity. A discussion of the autofictional literary strategies employed in *Au pays de mes racines* and *L'amant* follows. Building on Rosi Braidotti's feminist nomadic project of sexual difference and relating its three levels to the principal attributes of the narrative subjects of the novels, the author argues that their autofictional narrators can be defined as "Braidottianly" feminist and "nomadic" in their specific rendering of women's experience. In order to explore the power dynamics influencing the shaping of the narrators' specific subjectivity, the article subsequently takes recourse to Michel Foucault's theorisation of the practice of "subjectivation." The narrative subjects in Duras's and Cardinal's novels are shown to be presenting themselves as female individuals characterized by an intrinsic difference and, as such, they relate their stories of in-betweenness through the disclosure of the power dynamics moulding and influencing – "subjectivising" – the formation of their identities. Both novels, the article suggests, resist these "subjectivising" dynamics and yet also show how they influence the fragmentation of the multi-layered subjectivities represented. Although the female narrators are shown to be produced as subjects in discourse by the surrounding structures of domination, they nevertheless make clear that they are not simply subjected to such

constrictions, but that they are also able to challenge the colonial norms constraining them and, in doing so, aim to shape their own subjectivities.

In “Supposing (Un)Certainty: Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* and the Queer Essay”, **Lynley Edmeades** (University of Otago, New Zealand) takes Maggie Nelson’s hybrid essay as the starting point for her critical-personal reflexion on the notion and the practice of the so-called “queer essay”. According to Edmeades, the genre of the essay creates an ideal space to explore the multiple possibilities of uncertainty and instability. As the author points out, the essay criticises essentialising answers and fundamentally builds on the practice of supposition, rather than seeking to provide watertight conclusions and/or logical-narrative closure. In her reading of *Bluets* (2009) as an essayistic text that explores this potentiality of supposition, Edmeades links the genre to the queer perspective. The contribution thus proposes to read Nelson’s essay as a genre that questions dominant, hegemonic discourses and master narratives “in favor of the queer” (c2). In so doing, the author builds on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Thomas Larson’s analysis of *Bluets* ‘spiral’ shape as well as Teresa de Lauretis’s proposition that queer texts withstand narrativity and a closure of meaning. By carefully analysing the fragmented and meandering nature of *Bluets*, Edmeades shows how Nelson’s essay performs a ‘queering’ of its own genre.

In Edmeades’ view, Nelson’s *Bluets* is defined by its permeability and inability to “be pinned down” (c6): it defies conventions and fixed categories and serves as an act of resistance against homogenisation and commercialisation. Mirroring and exemplifying the uncertainty and supposition typical of the (queer) essay, Edmeades’ article is conceived as a personal-critical contribution that self-reflexively discusses the author’s thinking and writing process. It shows a dialogue with historical, feminist, queer and philosophical approaches to the topic and critically engages with comments and suggestions by its own reviewers and readers. Viewed against this

background and Nelson's rhetorics, Edmeades self-reflexively delves into how Nelson's queer essay acts as a "pre- and post-genre": it "opens rather than closes," "relates rather than dictates" and "generates, rather than defines" (c15).

The next article, entitled "Aleksandar Hemon's Photography-embedded Migrant Literature," turns to the intermedial form of Hemon's memoir *My Parents: An Introduction / This Does Not Belong to You* (2019) and his novel *The Lazarus Project* (2008). In her contribution, **Sharon Zelnick** (University of California Los Angeles) suggests that by closely and critically exploring what she calls the "subgenre" of photography-embedded literature, we can better understand why this form lends itself particularly well to migrant stories (d3). At the same time, analysing this literature, Zelnick proposes, allows us to develop novel insights into the relationship between literature and photography, in non-antagonistic or non-hierarchical terms. The article starts out by defining photography-embedded literature, paying particular attention to migrant narratives which take recourse to the incorporation of photographs within the literary text in this mixed form. It suggests that the ways photographs in this literature call on readers to engage with the paratextual and epitextual parts of books fundamentally alters conventional reading practices. Photography thus becomes central to the unfolding of stories, memories and migrations between these realms cross-temporally. The article then delves into an exploration of Hemon's works, considering them as points of departure for exploring this reconfiguration of photography and literature in the context of contemporary migrant literature. It illustrates how, instead of diving into a story by reading and imagining, the reader is expected to decode images, remember various histories, and actively connect the visual and verbal in multiple ways. To "read" this work, Zelnick suggests, we must participate in the embedded histories and life narratives which often overlap. Analysing the transmedial nature of Hemon's practice, Zelnick suggests photographs function as

embedded links to memories, stories, and histories that can be approached as individual parts, but also as parts of greater narrative journeys and arches that the reader co-creates. Hemon's works then, and by extension photography-embedded literature in general, evoke the past and the present, and signal to the future through text-image intersections and the employment of transhistorical narratives. As such, this cross-temporal dimension complicates theorisations about photography and migrant literature that situate the medium and author as being geographically and temporally in either the past or the present. Instead, as Zelnick's analysis demonstrates, the complexities of movement during and after political violence are communicated aesthetically as well as thematically.

Approaching the work of the world's most famous pop band from an intermedial angle, the German-language article "*Mad Days Out – Ein beatlesker Erkundungsgang zwischen Nationalität und Transkulturalität [A Beatlesque Exploration between Nationality and Transculturality]*" by **Kathrin Engelskircher** (independent researcher) channels existing Beatles research through the lens of an iconic photograph, taken of the band by Tom Murray during the so-called *Mad Days Out* session in July 1968. The author demonstrates how the picture both evokes and questions, comments, and ultimately transcends "Englishness" in ways that reflect the increasing diversification of English national culture at the time. Belonging to the later creative period of The Beatles from the mid-1960s onwards, Murray's photo shows the band dressed in colourful suits, standing in a garden amidst, and partly hidden by, high-growing hollyhocks of different colours, with a fence and house visible in the background. As Engelskircher explains, the photograph alludes to, and plays with, such national stereotypes as the English Garden, the Victorian mansion and English humour (as expressed in the play with in/visibility of individual band members) and confronts such traditional notions of Englishness with transcultural influences equally present in

the picture that have led – both in the microcosm of The Beatles’ work and in the macrocosm of the British Empire – to a re-negotiation and broadening of “Englishness”, orientating it towards the more diverse, transnational and transcultural notion of “Britishness”. The author attributes the visualization of transcultural influences in the photograph to the overgrown wildness of the flowers and The Beatles’ colourful Hippie clothes. According to Engelskircher, Beatles adepts will be quick to conceive the former as a visual allusion to the international ‘Flower Power’ movement, while they are likely to refer the latter to The Beatles’ stays in India, which resulted in the integration of South Asian sounds and instruments into their music.

In so doing, the author takes issue with the received image of The Beatles as an epitome of Englishness that tends to suppress the transnational and transcultural dimensions of the British lifeworld, resulting from the country’s imperial history and long history of immigration, that are particularly present in The Beatles’ hometown, the port city of Liverpool. The author also asserts how, by portraying The Beatles as agents of cultural mediation, the photograph conceives of identity as a process rather than a static and unchanging given in ways that resonate with the groups’ musical creations, which are just as indicative of their interest in, and experiments with, the emerging discourse on alternative lifestyles as the photograph in question is. According to Engelskircher, therefore, the photograph does not just reflect on social shifts at the time but also hints at alternative future life worlds. While the article thus highlights music’s specific ability for transcultural mediation, its most interesting take-away, in view of this journal’s focus on “crossings”, may be that, in the creative work of The Beatles and potentially that of other artists or groups, transcultural mediation often operates transmedially, shaping not just an artist’s music but also their use of photography, clothing, film, visual design etc.

In her contribution entitled “Parodic Transitions to Corporeal Reality”, **Bianca Friedman** (Edge Hill University) focuses on *Young Frankenstein*, the 1974 parodic film adaptation by American director Mel Brooks. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation and her paradox of parody, Friedman’s analysis argues that spectators’ construction of meaning takes place between degrees of knowledge. The author’s close reading of the film focuses on slapstick and comic encounters between characters which allow for different spectatorial experiences, depending on their knowledge of the source texts – which include not just Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* but also previous filmic adaptations of the novel – on the one hand, and of conventions of the gothic/horror genre on the other. Drawing on Irina Rajewsky’s distinction between intermedial references to specific (individual) texts and to genres, artforms, and media *qua* system, Friedman contends that the significance of the filmic text cannot be identified within *one* specific degree of knowledge but needs to be placed *between* degrees of knowledge that inform spectators’ creative acts of meaning-making. Hence, even though parody in *Young Frankenstein* potentially unfolds through a range of possible processes of understanding the film, the spectatorial experience of it is nevertheless consistently driven by genre-specific dynamics rather than, e.g., humour in general because of parody’s reliance on stereotypes, relating to either individual films or the filmic system of the gothic horror genre in general.

Applying Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response criticism to studies on film parody, concepts such as dynamic interaction, negation and implied reader allow Friedman to demonstrate that Brooks’ rendering of Shelley’s 19th-century gothic classic largely conforms with conventions of the gothic horror genre, but – at the same time – operates a shift from the abstract mechanisms of genre to more corporeal dimensions of experience by disrupting spectators’ expectations. Negation as a concept comes into play when reader expectations are thwarted and spectators are prompted



to reformulate their relationship with the conventions of the gothic horror genre. As Friedman reveals, in *Young Frankenstein*, the foregrounding of unexpected bodily transformations draws spectators' attention to the importance of corporeality in the adaptation itself and its source text. Ultimately, Brooks' insistence on corporeality in his adaptation also orientates spectators towards a meta-cinematographic reassessment of the gothic genre: they are invited to see the gothic in its corporeal dimension rather than as an abstract concept that regulates their horizon of expectations.

Finally, this issue closes with an interview with **Sulaiman Addonia** by **Elisabeth Bekers and VUB students (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)**. Addonia is an Eritrean-Ethiopian-British writer who lives in Brussels. His first novel, *The Consequences of Love* (2008), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and has been published in more than 20 languages. *Silence Is My Mother Tongue* (2018) was longlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and shortlisted for the 2021 Lambda Awards. The interview originally took place during a webinar in the context of the Master course "Postcolonial Literature in English", taught by Elisabeth Bekers at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the Autumn of 2020. In addition to the course instructor and colleagues and students from VUB and beyond who attended the seminar session as guests, students in the Master "Taal- en Letterkunde" and the "Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies" prepared and asked the questions. Subsequently, VUB alumnus and doctoral researcher Parham Aledavood (Université de Montréal) transcribed the interview. We are delighted to be able to share the interview here, which focuses mainly on Addonia's *Silence Is My Mother Tongue*, a compelling, vivid novel about the everyday challenges, feelings, intimacy, hopes and fears of refugees in an East-African camp. Additional topics of discussion include the changing classification of Addonia's writing and the "Creative Writing Academy for Refugees & Asylum Seekers" that Addonia founded in Brussels in 2019.