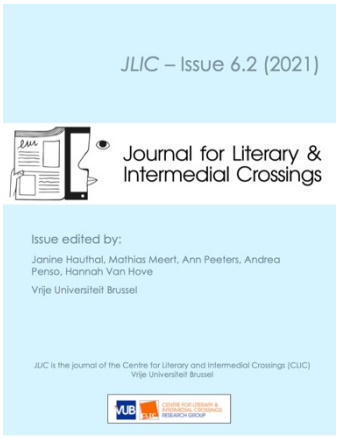

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Introduction

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Introduction

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Vrije Universiteit Brussel

This issue of the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* groups together seven articles selected through an open call, as well as an interview with the author Chika Unigwe. These contributions illustrate some of the wide-ranging concerns of the journal, presenting research which engages with literary and intermedial phenomena from various methodological angles and a wide range of disciplines including literary, digital, gaming, adaptation and cultural studies. They also include, for the first time in *JLIC*, a practice-as-research-based paper, attesting to the journal's opening-up to this strand of research and evidencing its interest and commitment to a diverse range of scientific and creative methodologies. Showcasing the work of both emerging and established scholars and practitioners, this issue, though constituted of contributions which are diverse in subject matter, time periods and methodologies covered, collectively illustrates the journal's emphasis on medial, literary, generic, spatial, cultural and material-ontological crossings that bridge a plurality of potential discourses, modalities, and methodologies.

In the opening article "Crossing Over: Encountering Materialist Entanglements in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics", **Karen Eckersley (Nottingham Trent University)** performs a materialist reading of Bishop's early writing. Drawing on foundational new materialist thinkers such as Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett and Karen Barad, Eckersley argues that Bishop's surrealist poetry exhibits a slippage between human and non-human forces in its exploration of the vibrancy of matter. In doing so, Eckersley suggests that Bishop holds anthropocentric perspectives to

account, dismantling its hierarchies by pointing to matter which is intrinsic to the composition of all ontologies, whether that be human, animal or object. Focusing in particular on Bishop's surrealist poems "The Monument" and "The Weed," the materialist reading Eckersley puts forward of these two works is theoretically underpinned by Bennett's so-called "Thing-Power" and Alaimo's "trans-corporeal" thinking. Investigating the theme of entanglement in material, human and natural encounters which these poems exhibit, Eckersley suggests that they speak to a trans-corporal mode that reveals the inter-changes and interconnections between all ontologies. Thus, "The Monument" portrays a shift from the supposed inanimate to the animate in a manner that re-evaluates human centrality and supremacy, as theorised by Bennett. In "The Weed," Bishop's description of how a human body becomes entwined with a weed, speaks to a communion of human and nature in a manner which is indicative of the porosity of all bodily boundaries, as theorised by Alaimo. Eckersley concludes that in Bishop's poetic space, the natural world is as agentive as the human speaker, entangling them in ongoing intra-actions between human and non-human ontologies in a manner that anticipates contemporary new materialist thinking.

Moving from a materialist reading of Bishop's mid-twentieth century poems to a socio-cultural consideration of contemporary poetry, the second article in this issue is entitled "Jay Bernard's *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry" by **Sarah Lawson Welsh (York St John University)**. It considers both the politics and aesthetics of Bernard's *Surge* (2019) as a collection which addresses the social and material in- and exclusions experienced by black Britons within specific historical, social and cultural contexts, including the 1981 New Cross and 2017 Grenfell fires in London. Identifying Bernard's use of the George Padmore Institute's archive as the overarching organizing principle of *Surge*, Lawson Welsh argues that the notion of the archive

is central to both its aesthetic and political project. Drawing on theoretical insights such as Jacques Derrida's concepts of "hauntology" and "archive fever," she considers the significant contribution which *Surge* makes to the formal experimentation of black British poetry alongside its more visible political project of raising unsettling questions and issues surrounding the in/visibility, forgetting and elision of key events in black British history. Exploring Bernard's hauntological use of voice in *Surge* which literally gives voice to unnamed victims of the New Cross and Grenfell fires, this article illustrates how the varied formal and aesthetic experimentation of Bernard's poetry collection queers and unsettles other kinds of discourses (including historiographic master narratives) by imaginatively re-embodying hitherto disembodied voices, enabling them to speak in the interstices between private memory and public history in affecting ways.

In her article "From Freakshow to Sitcom: Metatheatrical (Dis)Continuities in Contemporary African American Plays," **Jade Thomas (Vrije Universiteit Brussel / Research Foundation - Flanders)** continues to explore the representation of Black bodies in contemporary literature by specifically focusing on experimental African American theatre.[1] Thomas presents a comparative analysis of two play texts which use several metatheatrical devices, Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (2018) and Suzan-Lori Park's *Venus* (1995). In both cases, the strategic use of metatheatre, according to Thomas, implicates the audience in the dynamics of the white gaze that influences the representation of Black bodies on stage. Relying on Joanne Tompkin's theory of postcolonial metadrama, Thomas explores the counter-discursive, allegorical and mimicking types of metatheatre that undermine the power of the white gaze. Whereas postcolonial metatheatrical strategies in Park's *Venus* implicate the audience in the reenactment of Sarah Baartman's historical display, Drury's *Fairview* explicitly questions the ineffectiveness of postcolonial self-reflexive

[1] Jade Thomas capitalises the adjective 'Black' to refer to the shared cultural identity of Black people (see footnote 2 on p.d1), hence the editors here reflect the author's language use in the discussion of her article.

strategies to rewrite the white framing of the Black body in the 21st century. In a second step, Thomas argues that both plays also appropriate popular performance genres and advocates an expansion of the notion of counter-discursive metatheatre so as to include non-written artefacts and different (media) genres. Adopting an intermedial point of view, Thomas subsequently analyses how the genres of the freak show, sitcom, melodrama and minstrelsy are evoked in both plays and connects these intermedial references to the subversion of colonial discourse and the limitations of rewriting colonial history.

Irina Stanova and Ann Peeters (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), in turn, tackle a phenomenon right at the centre of intermediality studies, i.e., filmic adaptations, in their article entitled "The Visual Representation of Power Relationships in the Film Adaptations of William Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*." Their article focuses on three different adaptations of Somerset Maugham's early twentieth-century novel. Examining the cinematic techniques of blocking, camera angles and proxemic relations, Stanova and Peeters specifically explore the changing visualization of power dynamics between husband and wife across the adaptations. Their in-depth analysis of a key scene that recurs in all three versions culminates in the graphic representation of the protagonists' spatial and power relations. They demonstrate how each remake reflects the position of women in society at the time of production and how the changes in the *mise-en-scène* attest to the subtly growing empowerment of the female protagonist in the filmic interpretations of the novel's patriarchal structures. At the same time, the filmic *mise-en-scène* also tends to accord with the respective Hollywood aesthetic prevailing at the time of production. With actresses ranging from Greta Garbo and Eleanor Parker in the 1930s and 1950s to Naomi Watts in the 21st century, the role of Karin/Carol/Kitty starts out as a vehicle for a glamorous Hollywood star emanating mystery and melodramatic aloofness and eventually develops into the more realistic

and relatable portrayal of a woman entrapped in a power struggle with her husband. Accordingly, the two authors conclude that the three adaptations mirror the predominant discourses of their times concerning gender roles and use cinematic techniques such as blocking and camera angles to visualize and intensify their respective interpretation of the marriage crisis that Maugham's novel depicts.

In her article "Literary Spaces and the Aesthetics of Deprivation: Isolation and Textual Artefacts in *Dear Esther* (2012)," **Tímea Mészáros (University of Bonn)** further explores intermedial practices and methodologies by focusing on so-called walking simulators, a subgenre of adventure games that are unique in the sense that they rely mainly on exploration and environmental storytelling techniques in their gameplay. Walking simulators enable literary meaning creation and include games that combine these exploratory elements with themes and devices adopted from literature. As Mészáros observes, "literary walking simulators strive for a delicate balance in expression between intermediality and a literary foundation, assuring that while the experience of the game is multifaceted, the text and the story always gleam through the superimposed layers of various modalities" (f20). According to the author, the novelty of literary walking simulators as a genre must be reconnected to their focus on the game text and to the observation and interpretation of the fictional world through an absence of characters and a scarcity of typical game mechanics. After providing an outline of the walking simulator genre and a brief overview of existing theories of literariness in computer games, the author illustrates how these hybrids, situated at an intersection of electronic literature and games, operate with literary elements which serve as a basis for their multimodal narration. The article focuses on a specific case study, *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), considered the first walking simulator. By analysing the experiential qualities of the game, Mészáros argues that literary devices, themes, and symbolism

define the literary walking simulator's meaning construction. To this end, the themes of isolation and absence as well as the use of ellipses are examined along with the aesthetic element of textual artifacts as a proxy for absent character interactions. Ultimately, this article suggests that the textual core of these games simultaneously has a spatio-temporal presence and a literary function. The implications of this crossover between digital games and literature are discussed with the help of perspectives adopted from literary studies, aesthetic theory, game studies, and phenomenology.

In her article "'What's on your mind?' – A Literary Dialogue with the Machine-Computer," **Alexandra Saemmer (University of Paris 8)** is similarly interested in interrelationships between digital media, computers and electronic literature. Her article examines the poetics of digital literature created in dialogue with a human author and a machine computer. Relying on a materialist approach which pays careful attention to the conditions of the production and employment of digital literary texts, Saemmer performs a techno-semiotic analysis of works created by Annie Abrahams, Jean-Pierre Balpe and by herself. She draws attention to the fact that software tools are not neutral intermediaries; instead, they embody the viewpoints of their owners and engineers. Authors of digital literature who employ these tools are often concerned with highlighting this aspect of the media they work in, exploring tensions of multiple, often conflicting voices in an attempt to deconstruct the systems they work in. Focusing on the notions of "architext" (coined by Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuel Souchier as the highly structured writing interface of tools and platforms) and "computext" – defined by Saemmer as the idea that the machine anticipates the very production of media content, and sometimes even writes instead of the author (as in predictive text generators) – her article investigates the various interplays between digital platforms, authorial voice and audience. In doing so, Saemmer locates the poetics of digital

literature in the dialogical process that occurs between the human and the machine, rather than in the result produced.

The contribution by **Camille Intson (University of Toronto)**, the first practice-as-research based paper published in *JLIC* so far, complements the preceding articles by presenting very timely insights into the experience of both the digital writer and reader/participant. Drawing on psychological concepts of intimacy and materialist philosophies, Intson's article starts out by defining intimacy as voluntary acts of self-disclosure, consent-based exchanges, and shared understanding. She then posits that human-to-object-interactions too can be seen as sites of intimacy. Yet, while intimacy in human-to-human interactions is largely founded on physical touch, gesture, and copresence, Intson conceptualizes *digital* intimacy as a transmedial practice that is experienced by and through assemblages of physical and digital, of human and nonhuman matter. Aimed at understanding intimacy in a virtual environment where physical touch is impossible, the main part of the article discusses and reflects on Intson's own digital work, entitled *betweenspace* (2020). Created during the still ongoing global Corona pandemic at a time when physical contact became unfeasible, the work consists of an interactive website that Intson modelled on the garden flat in Kilburn, London, where she lived at the time. Combining text, image, video, and hyperlinks, *betweenspace* afforded digital intimacy in the space of contemplation and self-reflection that the website provided for participants. Moreover, intimacy was experienced when participants interacted with the digital interface that Intson modelled on the human body, simulating the physical experience of moving through the domestic space of the flat. However, by voicing the artist's disappointment about the lack of reciprocity, Intson's article importantly also critically attends to the limits of digital intimacy relating to the dispersal of self across technologies and to its inherently isolating effects.

Finally, this issue closes with an interview with **Chika Unigwe** by **Elisabeth Bekers and VUB students (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)**. Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1974, Unigwe is a writer of fiction, poetry and educational books. She studied English at the University of Nigeria, before moving to Turnhout, Belgium, in 1995. She went on to obtain an MA from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and a PhD on Igbo women's writing from Universiteit Leiden. In 2012 she was the second diaspora writer to win the Nigeria Prize for Literature for her novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). The interview featured here originally took place during a webinar in the context of the "Postcolonial Literature in English" Master course taught by Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the autumn of 2020. Students in the Master "Taal- en Letterkunde" and the "Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies" introduced the author to the guests in the audience (which included colleagues and students from VUB and beyond), they prepared and asked the questions; subsequently, Emre Ok transcribed the interview. We're delighted to be able to share the interview here, which focuses mainly on Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* (2019), a richly imagined collage of interconnected stories which addresses the experiences of a group of Nigerian migrants in Belgium and explores what it means to be a migrant in search of a better future.