

*JLIC* – Issue 6.2 (2021)



# Journal for Literary & Intermedial Crossings

Issue edited by:

Janine Hauthal, Mathias Meert, Ann Peeters, Andrea Penso, Hannah Van Hove

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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



The *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* or *JLIC* (ISSN 2506-8709) is an independent journal published twice a year. *JLIC* is edited by members of the Centre for Intermedial and Literary Crossings (CLIC), based at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium.

*JLIC* aims to offer a publication platform to researchers from various fields engaging either directly or indirectly with the study of hybrid literary, cultural and/or intermedial phenomena. The journal is a double blind peer-reviewed open access publication supported by an international advisory board and is aimed at an academic readership.

*JLIC* welcomes contributions in either Dutch, English, French, German, Italian or Spanish while supporting textual as well as multi-media formatting. According to *JLIC*'s open access policy, no fees are required for submissions, and all content is freely available. More information: <https://clic.research.vub.be/journal> or by email: [jlic@vub.be](mailto:jlic@vub.be).

*JLIC* Editors: Janine Hauthal, Mathias Meert, Ann Peeters, Andrea Penso and Hannah Van Hove

Editorial committee:

Inge Arteel, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Lars Bernaerts, Universiteit Gent

Michel Delville, Université de Liège

Rita De Maeseneer, Universiteit Antwerpen

Janine Hauthal (Co-Editor), Vrije Universiteit Brussel

David Martens, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Mathias Meert (Co-Editor), Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Dominique Nasta, Université libre de Bruxelles

Ann Peeters (Co-Editor), Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Michael Rosenfeld (Co-Editor), Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Hannah Van Hove (Co-Editor), Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Editorial assistants: Parham Aledavood and Emre Ok



BY-NC 4.0 DEED: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license.

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

Janine Hauthal, Mathias Meert, Ann Peeters, Andrea Penso, Hannah Van Hove.....a1-8

### **Crossing over: Encountering Materialist Entanglements in Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Poems 'The Monument' and 'The Weed'**

Karen Eckersley.....b1-25

### **Jay Bernard's Surge: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry**

Sarah Lawson Welsh.....c1-26

### **From Freakshow to Sitcom: Metatheatrical (Dis)Continuities in Contemporary African American Plays**

Jade Thomas.....d1-24

### **The Visual Representation of Power Relationships in the Film Adaptations of William Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil***

Irina Stanova, Ann Peeters.....e1-23

### **Literary Spaces and the Aesthetics of Deprivation: Isolation and Textual Artefacts in *Dear Esther* (2012)**

Tímea Mészáros.....f1-25

### **"What's on Your Mind?" – A Literary Dialogue with the Machine-Computer**

Alexandra Saemmer.....g1-22

### **Intimacy *betweenspace/s*: Towards a Transmedial Practice of Digital Intimacy**

Camille Intson.....h1-25

### **On Chiselling, Pruning and Trimming: Chika Unigwe in Conversation about *Better Never Than Late***

Elisabeth Bekers and VUB students; Transcribed by Emre Ok.....i1-19

## Introduction

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

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-corporeal 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 metatheatres 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

# **Crossing over: Encountering Materialist Entanglements in Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Poems 'The Monument' and 'The Weed'.**

Karen ECKERSLEY

Nottingham Trent University

In a journal that poet Elizabeth Bishop kept between 1934 and 1937 we witness an approach which anticipates new materialist thinking where, as Stacy Alaimo insists, matter is the “vast stuff of the world and ourselves” (*Bodily Natures* 1). In its pages, Bishop reflects upon the methods and purpose for poetry writing in a way that resonates with new materialist concerns, arguing that “[i]t’s a question of using the poet’s proper materials, with which he’s equipped by nature” (Costello 3). Bishop’s belief that poetry “proceeds from the material” estranges it from the Romantic method that she considers a “great perversity” (Costello 3-4) in its insistence upon a lofty, transcendental I/eye that presumes mastery over non-human ontologies.

Cassandra Laity’s essay “Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire” (2016) observes an inherent materialism at work in Bishop’s poetry suggesting that an inter-dependence of human life and the natural world exhibited in her work challenges the “neglectful patriarchal Anthropos currently scarring our planet” (Laity 429). More specifically Laity argues that Bishop’s poems “Crusoe in England” and “Vague Poem” enmesh queer intimacy in geological history suggesting that these works evoke the queer body whilst asserting the human species’ interconnection with nature. Laity draws parallels between Charles Darwin’s geological travel narratives and Bishop’s poems, placing them in context with the ecological turn in feminist theory. David Farrier’s *Anthropocene*

*Poetics* (2019) shares Laity's interest in the geological themes of Bishop's poetry writing, arguing that she exhibits a preoccupation with deep time that in turn has the capacity to help us think through our current ecological crisis. He explores how Bishop has much to offer "to a study of Anthropocene poetics" (Farrier 23) in the manner that her geologically concerned poetry "shifts the emphasis from a linear, teleological temporality to one that is more pliable and open" (Farrier 23). Beginning with a reading of Bishop's "Sandpiper" he observes in particular her capacity to unsettle humanist scale and perspective in the manner that the bird's gaze finds "the planetary in the particular" (Farrier 24). For Farrier, "thinking across radically divergent scales, as the primary work of the geologic as well as the geographical imagination, is part of a necessary response to uncertainty" (Farrier 24) – an uncertainty that speaks to our attempts to navigate the challenging terrain of an environmental crisis.

The geological intersections highlighted by Laity's and Farrier's analyses provide an apt introduction to the entangled matter implicating human and non-human ontologies that I examine in Bishop's work in this article. Whilst I share their assertions that Bishop's poetry is underpinned by a perspective that destabilizes presumptions about human mastery, I focus more upon the way in which her poetry achieves this via motifs of entangled matter, both organic and inorganic. I argue that Bishop's poetry hones in upon the world's molecular and constituent parts in a way that implicates human and non-human interconnections, unsettling anthropocentric perspectives by highlighting the common materiality of all, where, as physicist Karen Barad explains, "we too are phenomena" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 206). Bishop's belief that the poet should "express something not of them" (Costello 3-4) is manifest in the manner that her poetry of description etches a world from its raw materials, eschewing Humanism's dictates by pointing instead to matter as a horizontalizing force. In other words, a dynamism that overrides and thus dismantles

the hierarchies imposed by anthropocentrism, pointing instead to matter that is intrinsic to the composition of all ontologies, whether human, animal or object. In this way, I will argue that Bishop's surrealist poems "The Monument" and "The Weed" are prescient evocations of the interconnecting and intersecting matter that resonates with new materialist frameworks, theorized by Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad. In these poems I will demonstrate how Bishop shows how "Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 137).

### **A New Materialist Lens.**

A key tenet of new materialism is that "matter" is intrinsically multiple, self-organizing, dynamic, and inventive, criss-crossing between nature and culture, the animated and automated, bodies and environments. In Barad's words, matter is "a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations, rather than [...] a property of things" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 224). Materiality is, therefore, always already open to, or rather entangled with others – whether human or non-human. Barad warns against the continual perpetuation of the nature/culture binary, urging a more material approach to the world which instead acknowledges these binaries as co-existent, mutually implicated phenomena. Instead of reinforcing the boundary lines between matter, characterized as inert, and culture, defined as the Cartesian space of the thinking human subject or "cogito", Barad argues for a post-human account that questions the given-ness of human and non-human categories altogether; she examines instead how "the world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 135). In other words, Barad is underlining how all matter is implicated in a web of interconnections and entanglements, where human and non-human ontologies are never discrete individual entities but caught up in an ongoing, metamorphosing

dynamic with other matter. Referring to what she coins as “intra-activity” Barad argues that not only are humans’ phenomenal matter that inhabit the natural world as much as a cultural one, but that we are also implicated in the universe’s ongoing “becoming” in our continually evolving dynamic with multiple phenomena around us:

Phenomena are entanglements of spacetime mattering, not in the colloquial sense of the connection with intertwining of individual entities, but rather in the technical sense of ‘quantum entanglements’ which are the (ontological) inseparability of agential ‘intra-acting’ components. The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’ which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) marks an important shift, reopening and refiguring foundational notions of classical ontology such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, discourse, responsibility and accountability (“Nature’s Queer Performativity” 125).

Barad dispels with Humanism’s “classical ontologies” in her intra-active and post-humanist visions, where the foregrounding of all phenomena’s materiality - including the human’s - enables identities beyond the nature/culture binary. The concept of intra-action is central to Barad’s new materialism and refers to the movement generated in an encounter of two or more bodies in a process of becoming different. This is a post-human process in that it recognizes how all ontologies are constantly metamorphosing into evolving shapes in their shifting dynamic with other phenomena, exploding the boundaries of fixed individualism presumed by Humanism. In the context of her work, the term “entanglement” refers “not simply to be(ing) intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* ix). Entanglement, therefore, indicates how entities are always relational and how such relationality is fundamental to their constitution; an affirmative post-humanist mode that I argue is exhibited in Bishop’s surrealist poetry.

In *Diffractive Reading New Materialism, Theory, Critique* (2021) Kai Merten explores how Barad’s study of the diffractive process more specifically is one which can be applied to the process of reading a text or matter where the way in which waves spread, overlap and bend together

speaks to new materialism's foundational themes of entanglement. Merten defines diffractive reading as "not a particular method of literary analysis but rather a wholly new understanding of reading in general (text, matter, etc.), which sees reading/reader as participating in, not representing, what they read" (*Diffractive Reading* 16). In this way reading itself creates new matter which is, as Merten explains, "always readable and hence expandable" (*Diffractive Reading* 13). This diffractive model demonstrates how "there are no preexisting separately determinate entities called "humans"" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 338) as Barad posits and so, as Merten further explains the Baradian approach of "reading text and reading matter diffractively, should be united" (*Diffractive Reading* 7). He sums up this method in a manner that I suggest resonates with the entangled approach exhibited by the speaker of Bishop's poem "The Monument":

Measuring-cum-reading the phenomenon co-creates it by entanglements. This is diffractive reading in the wider sense of working out the entangled/wave-like nature of something, while at the same time partaking in the very creation of this entanglement (*Diffractive Reading* 6).

Alaimo similarly departs from nature/culture dualisms in a manner that resonates with Barad's work and the diffractive models that Merten harnesses for literary analysis. She argues that the key to reconfiguring a Cartesian appraisal of matter and nature is to view them as agentic forces that act, where "those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world" (*Material Feminisms* 4). Drawing upon Barad, she construes the human ontology as a dynamic one in a manner which implicates its resonance with nature and culture, rather than simply one or the other. To this end, Alaimo proposes a "trans-corporeality"; a map of transit which traces the "routes from human corporeality to the flesh of the other-than-human and back again" (*Material Feminisms* 253), pointing to the interconnectivity of all life. Alaimo's modes of entanglement emphasize the porosity of all bodily boundaries in a manner which threatens the presumed inherent wholeness of



the human, thus fracturing the hierarchical frameworks of Cartesian, humanist models which repeatedly prize individualism:

Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human-world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment.” [...] By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human (*Material Feminisms* 238).

Such “interchanges and interconnections” unsettle androcentrically mapped Cartesian boundary lines and harness a kinship with nature and lively matter; not simply as a passive refuge from Humanism, but as a dynamic and kaleidoscopic space providing a portal out of its reductive confines. The human body’s radical open-ness to its environment where it can be revised and reconfigured by other bodies in the manner that Alaimo’s trans-corporeality and Barad’s diffractive “intra-actions” highlight, resonates with Bishop’s materialist visions as this article posits.

My analysis of matter as a force with an agency of its own and how it is manifest in the surrealist work of Bishop, extends to a study of culture, objects and things, as well as human and non-human nature in her poetry. Most specifically I suggest that Jane Bennett’s conception of “Thing-Power”, described in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), resonates with Bishop’s poem “The Monument” (1946), where the supposed *inanimate*, exhibits itself as *animate* in a manner that re-evaluates human centrality and supremacy. Bennett’s study focuses upon assemblages of seemingly random vibrant materials that are catalyzed by their shifting interactions (or intra-actions) with other entities and agencies. She explains the vivacity of shifting material components whilst referring to a walk by the river, suggesting that co-mingling between diverse entities infuses each item with new life in a way that the anthropocentric eye is habitually blind to:

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me [...] In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them (Bennett 5).

Such a “contingent tableau” resonates with the entangled crossovers which recurrently occur in Bishop’s poetry both in connection to the “Thing Power” exhibited in “The Monument” but also in her most surrealist of works, “The Weed” (1946). In the intense entanglements of human and non-human life exhibited in this poem, I will argue that Bishop anticipates the “trans-corporeality” that exists between ontologies in their common materiality. In “The Weed”, Bishop exposes how Humanism’s belief in borderlines delineating human and non-human life is a fiction. The slippages she forges between the human speaker and organic matter, which create intra-active contact zones, rupture such borderlines for a more fluid and balanced milieu. In these poetic visions I will explore how Bishop’s work resonates with Alaimo’s assertion that “human corporeality in all its fleshiness, is inseparable from “nature” or “environment”” (*Material Feminisms* 238).

### **New Materialist Encounters in “The Monument”.**

Published in Bishop’s first collection *North & South* in 1946, “The Monument” exhibits new materialist sensibilities in the glimpses of the frottage technique initiated by surrealist Max Ernst. This praxis – one which involved using the floorboards to make a series of rubbings with a pencil – is visible in the poem in the manner that the speaker describes the grainy woodwork of the monument inflecting the sky in “long-fibred clouds” (“The Monument”, line 30). This resonates with the way in which Ernst similarly details the frottage process impacting upon his own lens of perception. Whilst Bishop did not identify as a surrealist writer directly and repeatedly refused to be categorized altogether, critics including Richard Mullen, and Susan Rosenbaum more recently,

have pointed to a surrealist sensibility at work in her early poetry. Rosenbaum observes that “Bishop joined other women artists interested in Surrealism – such as Eileen Agar, Lee Miller, and Leonor Fini –in looking beyond Freud to natural history, indicating a common desire for an expanded view of nature” (Rosenbaum, 71-72). She adds that “Bishop has much in common with other female and queer poets and artists who were inspired by Surrealism” and that in particular she “addresses Surrealism in the context of natural history” (Rosenbaum 71). Bishop spent time in Paris after Vassar College in 1934 and acknowledged that she had studied the work of surrealist painters in particular, sharing their interest in explorations of the unconscious. A number of her poems from this period exhibit a fascination with dream-worlds as the poems “Sleeping Standing Up” and “Sleeping on the Ceiling” from *North & South* demonstrate. Bishop owned a copy of Ernst’s book *Histoire Naturelle* (1926) which contained a volume of his prints exhibiting the frottage method, and in a letter to Anne Stevenson, she acknowledges the impact that the surrealist technique had upon “The Monument.” Her Key West notebooks, contained at Vassar Library, detail a sketch of a monument with notes above it saying “Pound out the ideas of sight –”, and, in a clear reference to Ernst’s method, “Take frottage of this sea” (Bergmann 1). This technique appealed to Bishop in its capacity to render tightly detailed and textured surfaces, thereby communicating her fascination with the dynamic between what can be seen and touched, as well as her belief that poetry “proceeds from the material” (Costello 3). The monument’s ontological ambiguity in the poem is suggestive of the poet’s own metamorphosing perceptions and speaks to a diffractive reading; Bishop invokes what Merten would call “the entangled co-creation of matter by observing or reading it” (*Diffractive Reading* 6) as her poetic praxis does not seek to represent or construct a copy of the monument but rather partakes in its evolving configuration.

Bishop labels the monument as an “artefact” which is potentially estranged from the earth, but also one whose decorations “give it away as having life, and wishing” (“The Monument”, line 67) thereby materially reconnecting it as an agentic phenomenon. Bishop conveys a sense of its animation and vivacity in its dynamic interaction with the material environment in which it is embedded, where “the light goes around it/like a prowling animal” (“The Monument”, lines 70-71). Bishop’s invocation of a more tactile approach speaks to a kinesthetic, inter-connected strategy in her work, intimating an earthy and grounded perception of the world and its contents; a materialist landscape that she does not wish to subsume into an anthropocentrically appropriated sphere. In this materialist reading, I posit that “The Monument” conveys the “curious ability of the inanimate to animate” in a manner that points to the materiality of all matter, where human encounters with supposedly inert phenomena – including a monument – have the potential to “chasten [...] fantasies of human mastery” (Bennett 122) in their ontological cross-over. Bishop’s granular description, deftly accruing the details of the monument and its setting, etches a poetic image in such a way that for the readers of the poem, she simulates the process of its construction as she writes. In the opening stanza, she draws out lines of material immanence between building her poem and the monument itself, forging a cultural and material cross-over which speaks to diffractive and intra-active modes of writing and reading that dissolves humanist dialectics of power:

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood  
built somewhat like a box. No. Built  
like several boxes in descending sizes  
one above the other.  
Each is turned half-way round so that  
its corners point toward the sides  
of the one below and angles alternate.  
Then on the topmost cube is set  
a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood (“The Monument”, lines 1-9).

The speaker's opening line asking if a companion can "see the monument?" is a provocative one, functioning more as an invitation to begin to see the structure differently and to interact with it. In this way Bishop immediately engages with a materialist mode, perceiving the monument beyond the anthropocentrically anchored configuration that claims a monopoly on its meaning. In this opening stanza, the poet is fostering a new receptivity to the monument, adopting a diffractive lens that escapes humanist appropriation by focusing instead upon its material agency, anticipating Bennett's "Thing-Power". Not only does Bishop identify the agentive potential of the monument's components, she also alludes to their entangled co-existence where they are connected both in their tactile proximity to each other, but also in the manner that she employs a simile to draw parallels between them. The structure comprising of an assemblage appearing "like several boxes" speaks to materialism's multiplicity over humanist individualism as well as Bishop's provisional appraisal of what she sees, indicative of her own materialist lens that recognizes the potential for the monument's metamorphosis. Such a post-anthropocentric approach, which eschews Humanism's repeated claims to mastery, conflates with Friedrich Nietzsche's insistence that humans must begin to see the world anew to enable a more receptive wakefulness to the environments in which we exist:

Learning to see – accustoming the idea to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides... Learning to see, as I understand it, is almost what, unphilosophically speaking, is called a strong will: the essential feature is precisely not to 'will' – to be able to suspend decision. (Nietzsche 6)

Cultivating a new receptivity in the manner that Nietzsche extols has the capacity to over-come the sense of self that characterizes attempts at human mastery, giving way instead to a mode that experiences matter as generative and agentive. This is precisely the manner in which the speaker of "The Monument" expresses their experience of the structure, eschewing epistemological

reflections upon its cultural symbolism for a materially driven understanding that implicates human and non-human ontologies collectively. Bishop shares Nietzsche's approach in the way that she grasps "each individual case from all sides", swerving to correct initial presumptions about the monument's singularity to express instead its assembled plurality. Such epanorthosis – a process of rephrasing something said in order to emphasize or correct oneself – underlines how the monument itself is similarly subject to change and thereby not a fixed, inert entity. Its material and intra-active potential underlining a dynamic more-than-human ontology, is manifest in Bishop's description of its "weathered" appearance, demonstrating a shape-shifting phenomenon at the mercy of temporal and meteorological elements. As a result, Bishop situates the structure not as a separate unit, but one enmeshed in a wider, inter-connected environment, further speaking to an entangled mode and a diffractive reading as this first stanza extract intimates:

A sea of narrow, horizontal boards  
lies out behind our lonely monument,  
its long grains alternating right and left  
like floorboards – spotted, swarming-still,  
and motionless. A sky runs parallel,  
and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:  
splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds. ("The Monument", lines 24-30)

Whilst the reference to "our lonely monument" has the potential to anthropomorphize it, such a description could also suggest that the poet is in fact finding a kinship with this spectacle; not as a vision that is controlled by the human eye but as one that exhibits further signs of our connection with it. Here we witness, as Barad highlights, how humans "emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena" doing so as "part of the larger material configuration [...] of the world" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 338). So proximate and alive is the material agency of the wooden monument that the second speaker of the poem imagines its grainy effect spilling and crossing over into the sky and sea space, where clouds are "full of glistening splinters" and the sea

becomes a series of “horizontal boards.” Bishop’s “a sky,” rather than one preceded by the definite article, demonstrates how it is both an evolving shifting phenomenon itself, as well as a space that eludes the concrete permanence that the anthropocentric I/eye attaches to it. Rather, in its denotation as *a* instead of *the*, Bishop conveys how “sky” is a metamorphosing and plural phenomenon which slides between many variables and versions. The paradoxical “swarming-still” of the sea speaks to the illusory appearance of the monument’s own stasis which Bishop shatters via her lively evocation of the structure; in this way she anticipates Bennett’s postulation that there is no point of pure stillness in a materialist landscape. Bishop’s recurrent sibilance in the “splintery sunlight” and “glistening splinters” conveys a textured effect to her language, thereby creating a material resonance between poetic form and subject matter, pointing to a further spillage across phenomena. The reference to splintering similarly invokes a vision of how ontologies cross over and become caught up in one another, entangling and embedding within their material layers in a diffractive process. The tactility of this space, suggested by a “coarser sky” and “long-fibred clouds,” speaks to Bishop’s synesthetic praxis which resonantly enmeshes the sensorial experience in a materialist manner.

The second speaker of the poem, who remains anonymous, observes that the “dryness in which the monument is cracking” even inflects the quality of the air, now described as one that is “eroded” as it is breathed in. The speaker is identified in the second person in the opening line of the poem and is made present through their detailed observations and interrogative enquiries about the monument’s existence which are directed at the lyric “I”. In this knotted assemblage, Bishop evokes a poetry inflected by Ernst’s frottage technique. Bishop’s scene constructed from “floorboards” and “long-fibred clouds” clearly speaks to the materiality of this practice. In the following quotation, Ernst describes how in the process of making these pencil rubbings, he

becomes aware of transformations taking place within the media he is studying, as well as how this aesthetic approach triggers a consciousness of other matter that surrounds him:

[...]the fact that the drawings thus obtained steadily lose, thanks to a series of suggestions and transmutations occurring to one spontaneously[...]the character of the material being studied – wood - and assume the aspect of unbelievably clear images of nature [...] I was led to examine the same way, but indiscriminately, many kinds of material happening to be in my field of vision – leaves and their veins, the unravelling edges of sackcloth, the palette-knife markings on a “modern” picture (Mullen 66).

In this account, Ernst evokes an intricate web of material happenings in a manner which Bishop recapitulates in her poem, where the speaker’s awareness of the “many kinds of material happening” in the world becomes heightened and intense in mutually implicated cross-overs. Ernst also intimates a “ThingPower” where a list of seemingly inert objects including the “sackcloth” and a “modern’ picture,” radiate an agentic energy which catalyzes his own artistic powers. In the same way that Ernst’s own frottage process prompts a post-anthropocentric lens of perception within him, so too does Bishop’s poetic eye forge an increasingly shifting picture in her poem. I suggest that she details overlapping and material entities in such a way that they spill like waves, beyond the borders of the monument itself in diffractive manoeuvres. This preoccupation with the materiality of the monument’s existence indicates how the speaker does not quest for definitive proof of its historical purpose or significance. Rather, she appears to deliberately obfuscate the specificities of its past as though charting its genealogy in humanist terms is secondary to its ongoing, vibrant materiality. This dynamic, forward movement is manifest in the final stanza where Bishop conjures a vision of the monument’s capacity to forge new lines of immanence towards other entities, both human and non-human. Part of the monument’s capacity to affect is the manner in which Bishop conveys it as a malleable and transversal entity with the ability to seep into the human imagination, intimating a diffractive approach to material phenomena; a concept



which Bennett discusses in response to the lively matter she encounters on her river walk that impacts upon her as much as the objects she observes. In this final stanza, Bishop etches a vision of not only what the monument may be, but also what it could further become, thus unravelling humanist presumptions of it as an inert and stationary ontology anchored in the past:

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside  
or far away on even drier soil.  
But roughly but adequately it can shelter  
what is within (which after all  
cannot have been intended to be seen).  
It is the beginning of a painting,  
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,  
and all of wood. Watch it closely. ("The Monument", lines 74-81)

The "artist-prince", mentioned vaguely in the second stanza, is similarly only given a passing reference here, his whereabouts unknown and not of major consequence. Of greater interest is the monument's future capacity to shapeshift, where Bishop's reference to a "beginning" is significant. Such a "beginning" dislodges the monument from a finite history skewed by anthropocentrism, instead speaking to what physicist Karen Barad describes as matter that is "produced and productive, generated and generative" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 137). In this way the structure is evoked as an on-going force, projected as a possible "sculpture, or poem, or monument," malleable both in its physical materiality as an entity "all of wood", but also in its capacity to stir an observer's imagination, becoming other art forms. Whilst these other art forms could be construed as a reference to an anthropocentric approach I posit that Bishop is speaking to the malleability of the arts and culture; shifting forms that underline their intrinsic materiality which demonstrates a kinship with non-human matter and nature. In the metamorphic visions that Bishop imagines, we see how the monument exhibits intra-active dynamisms in a way that affirmatively displaces anthropocentrically conceived notions of a fixed, classical ontology. These

mobile entanglements that implicate the speaker as much as the monument itself, speak to Rosi Braidotti's post-humanist argument that "we live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadism" (*Metamorphoses 2*). She adds that "these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation" (*Metamorphoses 2*). The evolving and transversal interconnections between the monument and its environment, as well as its relationship to the human observers are a precise embodiment of this becoming mode showing how, as Barad explains, all matter constitutes "not a thing but a doing" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 139).

Bishop's final imperative regarding the monument, "Watch it closely," is key to understanding the mobility of all matter and our relationship with it as matter ourselves. It marks the processual and mobile nature of the speaker's thoughts, who at the beginning of the poem talked of attempting to "see" it instead. The move to *watch* rather than simply *see* demonstrates a growing materialist approach to the monument, where by actively observing the structure and its phenomenal cross-overs she emerges from the linear boundaries that result in androcentric myopia. This is precisely the approach that characterizes Bishop's poem where the monument's material elasticity – both as a cultural and as a physical entity – demonstrates a "Thing-Power" that horizontalizes human and non-human relations. Most significantly this understanding exhibited in the poem intimates how humans are themselves embedded within the materiality of their environment, rather than independently situated upon an imagined hierarchical throne. Barad discusses this post-human mode of affirmative entwinement between all matter in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007):

Human practices are not the only practices that come to matter, but neither is the world...independent of human practices...In other words humans (like other parts of nature) are of the world not in the world, and surely not outside of it looking in. Humans are intra-actively (re)constituted as part of the world's becoming (206).

Recognizing how the human species is of the world and therefore matter amongst matter rather than outside of it is a position that the speaker of Bishop's "The Monument" adopts, articulating her belief that poetry begins with "the material". Rather, as we witness in the poem, the human viewer is a virtual component in a shifting assemblage of material entities, bringing these forces into a tangled proximity in a swirl of metamorphosing relations. Such *becoming* demonstrate how bodies – human and more-than-human – are agentic ontologies in the manner that new materialist Moira Gatens posits. Exhibiting a post-human thinking that resonates with Barad's, she explains how the "body does not have a truth or true nature since it is a process, and its meaning and capacities vary according to its context" (Gatens 57). It is an understanding which is pertinent to "The Monument" but also introduces Bishop's poem "The Weed"; a work which moves from concepts of "Thing-Power" towards human-nature entanglements thereby anticipating Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeal modes. In the following analysis I will investigate the manner in which "The Weed" anticipates Alaimo's postulation that human's "material fleshiness" makes it inseparable from the environment, eschewing androcentric presuppositions that the body is a sealed unit, divorced from the world around it.

### **Trans-corporeal Entanglements in "The Weed".**

Also located in the early poetry collection *North & South* (1946), Bishop's oneiric and most conspicuously surrealist poem "The Weed" sees the speaker dreaming that "dead and meditating" a weed bursts forth from her heart. Bishop immediately establishes the porosity of boundaries between human and nature as their ontologies fuse together in a vibrant and ontological cross-over. In this poem we see how, as Gatens explains, human identity "can never be viewed as a final or finished product", since it is "in constant interchange with its environment" (Gatens 110).

Beginning in a mode of stillness, where the heart is “cold”, and all is “frozen” and “unchanged”, the mood shifts as the weed explosively stirs both the psychological and natural landscape to life:

A slight young weed  
had pushed up through the heart and its  
green head was nodding on the breast.  
(All this was in the dark,)  
It grew an inch like a blade of grass;  
next, one leaf shot out of its side  
a twisting, waving flag, and then  
two leaves moved like a semaphore. (“The Weed”, lines 15-22)

The weed of the poem is immediately characterized by the vital dynamism of its urgent movements, thereby contrasting with the initial stillness and singularity of the human speaker at the beginning. The poetic landscape shifts from one of inertia to one that is fractiously mobile; here the weed is “twisting” and “waving,” tenaciously surging on. Like the monument, it is a processual entity identified by its component parts of “stem,” “leaf” and “nervous roots” in a description which anthropomorphizes it thus bringing human and non-human into close proximity. The agentive powers of the poem’s weed are less surprising than the monument’s given that it is organic matter, but this article argues that nonetheless, both poems share a kinship in their prescient vision of the agency of all matter. Bishop’s comparison of the leaves to a “semaphore” intimates the weed’s communicative powers, establishing this organic life as an inter-connecting force which thereby implicates other matter. Bishop’s reference to the weed “nodding on the breast” simulates an image of maternal sustenance and therefore a slippage between the boundaries of a human and non-human ontology, etching a palpable trans-corporeal dynamic. The weed embedding itself within the human body suggests that it erupts from an anthropocentrically allotted background position, instead thrusting itself into the realms of human consciousness and speaking to all matter’s iterative entanglement. Such dynamic reconfigurations depict the criss-crossing slippages

which occur between human and environment, where the weed's and the human speaker's shifting materialist ontologies spill over to forge new becoming in the manner discussed regarding the monument. In the same way as the structure is imagined in the new guise of a poem or painting, so too does the vision of the weed and the human speaker begin to metamorphose and evolve in fertile new directions:

The rooted heart began to change  
(not beat) and then it split apart  
and from it broke a flood of water.  
Two rivers glanced off from the sides,  
one to the right, one to the left,  
two rushing, half-clear streams,  
(the ribs made of them two cascades)  
which assuredly, smooth as glass,  
went off through the fine black grains of earth. ('The Weed', lines 28-36)

Here, I suggest that the weed exhibits a post-humanist performativity where its many intra-actions and crossovers with its environment convey how it is an organic life that does not operate in a sealed vacuum any more than a human does. Whilst the speaker is a nurturing force for the weed as I have explained, so too does the weed foster growth in a reciprocal dynamic, eschewing humanist frameworks of Cartesian individualism for a vision of nature's agentic plurality and fertility. Emphasizing the significance of the "fine black grains of earth" recalling Bishop's imperative that the poet "proceeds from the material", the poem signposts the collective materiality of all matter – including the microscopic - as well as botanic life, all too often myopically consigned to non-human otherness. Rather than dismissing these grains of earth and the weed to the realm of a passive, subordinated nature to be choreographed at the hands of man, Bishop's poetics instead forges them as powerful and catalyzing forces. Such agentic movement is manifest in the manner that Bishop describes "a flood of water" and streams gathering pace to become "cascades." This watery world is conjured as a vital and borderless space, where the weed's

agentive materiality identifies it as a metamorphosing phenomenon that criss-crosses in a web of trans-corporeal visions. The oscillating and unpredictable shifts in the weed's movements speaks to an instability that is similarly exhibited by the human speaker, pointing to the world that operates beyond the illusion of man's mastery over nature. The speaker is both dreaming, but also meditating; she is in a "grave" or a "bed" ("The Weed", line 2). The incidental rhymes eschew any clear patterning and so emphasize the sense of an unpredictable material agency of both the human speaker and more-than-human world which are aligned in their erratic materialism. It is a praxis which resonates with what Bennett identifies as a "primordial swerve," recognizing that the "world is not determined" and "that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things" (Bennett 18).

The synchronous and symbiotic relationship which exists between the human speaker and the weed becomes heightened and intense in the final section of the poem where an increasingly trans-corporeal dynamism enables the speaker to begin to see differently in the manner of the human observer in "The Monument":

A few drops fell upon my face  
and in my eyes, I could see  
(or, in that black place, I thought I saw)  
that each drop contained a light,  
a small, illuminated scene;  
the weed-deflected stream was made  
itself of racing images. ("The Weed", lines 40-47)

The water from the weed's leaves, now "fringed with heavy drops" ("The Weed", line 39), continues to evoke the sense of botanic life's fertility and its capacity to provide sustenance for the human speaker; not just in a corporeal manner but also in the way that Bishop arranges her lines emphasizing that these drops allow her to see. Here Bishop conveys a shift of perspective as though the speaker has experienced a post-human awakening as a result of her entanglement with the weed. Themes of birth, iterated earlier in Bishop's reference to a flood of water, return here with

drops upon the speaker's face, indicative of a quasi, post-human baptism. In seeing anew, Bishop further estranges the speaker from the epistemic habits of the glaring anthropocentric world, instead concentrating upon themes of diminution as if to reconnect with the earthly essence of "a small, illuminated scene." In this granular, materialist vision she depicts the stream as a series of "racing images" thereby comprised of a collage of miniatures in the same way as she portrays the sea in "The Monument" as consisting of "horizontal boards". These visions are not of homogenized surfaces but speak to the earthy raw matter that underpins human and more-than-human existence, as lines 48 to 51 of the poem suggest:

(As if a river should carry all  
the scenes that it had once reflected  
shut in its waters, and not floating  
on momentary surfaces.) ("The Weed", lines 48-51)

The entanglement of human and non-human spaces are emphasized here, where brackets are indicative of the speaker's inner thoughts beneath exterior observations in the same way as the river itself contains scenes below what is captured beyond its "momentary surfaces." Brackets also highlight the spontaneous agency of the speaker's reflections, resonating with the agentic intensity of the river's own forward propulsions which operate outside of androcentric mastery. Bishop's poem here suggests that the speaker processes her thoughts synchronously with the river's own everyday happenings, entwined in a current of scenes which overlap and co-mingle together as lively matter. Bishop intimates in this poem that a compendium of scenes can be traced through the river's history, forging it as a collective assemblage of vibrant matter that muddles epistemologically carved categories of time and space. As a result Bishop conjures the river as a living entity akin to human matter, one that implicates the speaker within it as a similarly vibrant ontology, eschewing Cartesian notions of nature's passivity to evoke instead a trans-corporeal

realm. As this analysis argues, the human speaker in “The Weed” attests to the reciprocal and intra-acting dynamic between human and non-human worlds in a way that presciently speaks to materialist thinking. Bishop suggests that there is the sense that the speaker is “recomposed” by the weed whilst also enabling its own growth; she serves as fertile and dynamic ground on which the weed can flourish, where even in death, human corporeality is a metamorphosing and affective entity as this final stanza indicates:

The weed stood in the severed heart.  
“What are you doing there?” I asked.  
It lifted its head all dripping wet  
(with my own thoughts?)  
And answered then: “I grow,” it said,  
“but to divide your heart again.” (“The Weed”, lines 52-57)

Here, Bishop evokes a disaggregated body entangled in a knotty, trans-corporeal assemblage, where the collective ontologies of weed and speaker are intimated in the vision of the weed dripping wet with her “own thoughts?” In this line there is the sense that these two entities have become interchangeable ontologies, or “compost” in the manner that Donna Haraway discusses. Haraway’s insistence that all material entities “become-with” each other in what she coins as “hot-compost piles” resonates with the vision of the entangled speaker and weed in Bishop’s poem. In this way I suggest that Bishop anticipates Haraway’s belief in a “kind of material semiotics” where all beings are “always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly” (Haraway 4). The weed’s exclamation that it grows “to divide your heart again” demonstrates how these ontologies are constantly enfolded in ever becoming reconfigurations affirmatively distanced from Cartesian thinkers’ propensity for human individualism. The weed here is an agentic and fertile interconnected force in Bishop’s poem where we witness how “Matter’s dynamism is inexhaustible, exuberant and prolific” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 170).



## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the materially-grounded contact zones that Bishop evokes in “The Monument” and “The Weed” intimate the entanglements between human and non-human ontologies in a manner that anticipates contemporary new materialist thinking. The vibrant and agentic dynamic between humans and nature, as well as humans and objects, points to the collective materiality that characterizes all matter in a manner which destabilizes anthropocentric positions. I have suggested that whilst not necessarily categorized as a surrealist herself, Bishop does however share certain surrealist sensibilities with women artist contemporaries who similarly evoked empowering visions of females interconnecting with the natural world in a manner that anticipates a post-human and feminist politics. In this way she corresponds with surrealist scholar Whitney Chadwick’s observation that Surrealism was committed to the “complete transformation of human values” (Chadwick 13), where women surrealists in particular looked to natural history in a manner that gave voice to a feminist and prescient ecological perspective. In both “The Monument” and “The Weed” we witness how “humans are part of the configuration or ongoing configuration of the world” where “we too are phenomena” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 206). Bishop’s belief in proceeding from the world’s raw materials when writing poetry, which she conveys in her early diaries, points to her connected approach revealing her as a writer whose work resonates with the new materialist frameworks of Alaimo, Barad and Bennet. In the poems investigated here I have considered how she hints at what Bennett defines as “this sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side” (Bennett 18), both in relation to “Thing” ontologies but also to the natural world. This sense of a “strange” interconnection is harnessed in the surrealist moments of Bishop’s writing where a static structure becomes unexpectedly mobile in “The Monument” and botanic life fuses itself with the human body in “The Weed,” conjuring a

post-anthropocentric approach that destabilizes humanist hierarchies. Bishop's speakers and the subject matter she discusses are radically open to metamorphosis and diffractive processes, more often exhibiting an in-between positioning in their constant state of flux rather than settling upon a fixed physical and cultural space. Most significantly, I have argued that Bishop's poetry is founded in molecular matter that implicates and entangles us all, where, as the speaker of her "Sandpiper" poem wisely asserts, "no detail is too small." In this way, she eschews Humanism's preoccupation with surface representations for visions which highlight the intricate webs of matter that connect and entangle all phenomena, whether human or non-human, organic or inorganic.

## Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Alaimo, Stacy and Hekman, Susan, editors. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Barad, Karen. "Nature's Queer Performativity." *Que Parle*, Vol.19, Spring/Summer 2011, pp.121-158.
- Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." Published in *Material Feminisms* (2008).
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bergmann, Meredith. "Seeing *The Monument*." *Per Contra An International Journal of the Arts, Literature, and Ideas*, Issue 23, 2011.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Monument" and "The Weed" in *The Centenary Edition Poems Elizabeth Bishop*. Chatto and Windus, 2011.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Polity Press, 2002.
- Chadwick, Whitney. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. (Hampshire: Thames and Hudson, 1985).
- Costello, Bonnie. *Elizabeth Bishop Questions of Mastery*. Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Farrier, David. *Anthropocene Poetics Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- Gatens, Moira. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. Routledge, 1996.

- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Laity, Cassandra. "Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire: Elizabeth Bishop's Love Poetry and Charles Darwin's Beagle Geology Travel Narratives" in *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Vol.10, Issue 3, November 2016, pp. 429-450.
- Merten, Kai. *Diffraction Reading New Materialism, Theory, Critique*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2021.
- Mullen, Richard. "Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance." *American Literature*, Vol.54, March 1982, pp.63-80.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann. Penguin, 1954.
- Rosenbaum, Susan. "Bishop and the Natural World" in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop* edited by Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

# Jay Bernard's *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry

Sarah LAWSON WELSH

York St John University

The name of the one that disappeared must have gotten inscribed some place else. (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 4)

What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted perhaps by the chase we are leading? (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10)

The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 36)

## Introduction

Jay Bernard's "*Surge*: Side A," a stunning multi-media performance combining spoken word, song and documentary film was first performed at the Last Word Festival at the Roundhouse in Camden in 2018 and won the Ted Hughes Prize for Poetry the same year. Parts of it were later published in the critically acclaimed poetry collection *Surge* (2019). Bernard's residency at the George Padmore Institute London in 2017 allowed them (the poet's preferred pronoun<sup>1</sup>) to access the Institute's archives relating to black British history, an experience which proved central to the writing of many of the poems in their performed and published formats. Through poems which are often boldly innovative and experimental, yet keenly attuned to particular social and material in/exclusions within specific historical and socio-cultural contexts, Bernard constructs a "radical

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard described themselves as a "trans non-binary person" before their performance of "Bras" at Penguin Pride in Brighton, UK, 2018 ("Poet Jay Bernard performs 'Bras'").

excavation of black British history” (“Great New Poetry Books”). Central to this “excavation” are two notorious London-based fires: New Cross (1981) and Grenfell (2017), the victims of both of which were mainly working-class black Britons and ethnic minority subjects.

This article 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. There are poems in *Surge* which meditate on the nature of memory, the role of trauma, grief and dis/embodiment and the power of certain voices to trouble and to “haunt” mainstream histories. Indeed, the collection as a whole asks us to consider what it means to be haunted by a history and to “haunt it back.”<sup>2</sup> Bernard is especially engaged with the “vexed [...] relationship between public narration and private truths” (11) as they write to connect the two fires across a continuing landscape of racism, incompetence, and institutional neglect of certain communities.

In other, more introspective poems in the collection, Bernard examines the complexities of queer, black intersectional identities in Britain and their personal relation to the archive for a queer black trans subject. Drawing on theoretical insights such as Derrida’s concepts of “hauntology” and “archive fever,” this article argues that the notion of the archive is central to both the aesthetic and political project of *Surge*. The varied formal and aesthetic experimentation of many of the poems allow Bernard to ask some challenging questions of British society and its relation to its history in notably innovative ways. Bernard harnesses the power of poetry to queer or unsettle

---

<sup>2</sup> This is strikingly similar to Jacques Derrida’s question with which this article began: “What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted perhaps by the chase we are leading?” (*Specters of Marx* 10). Derrida is referencing *Hamlet* here and the ways in which his search for his dead father’s ghost starts to “haunt” him more profoundly in terms of his dis/locatedness and his very condition of being. Bernard captures some of this sense, but with greater agency when they write in the foreword to *Surge*: “I am haunted by this history, but I also haunt it back” (xi).

other kinds of discourse (including orthodox historical narrative) by imaginatively re-embodiment hitherto disembodied voices, enabling them to speak in the interstices between private memory and public history in some unique (and strikingly affecting) ways.

### **Writing back to black British histories: The New Cross Massacre (1981)**

The New Cross Fire of January 1981, a house fire in South London which claimed the lives of 13 young people and injured 27 others, was a highly significant event in black British history, yet it is still not widely acknowledged. By taking what came to be known as the “New Cross Massacre” as a focus point in key poems in *Surge*, Bernard draws attention to the wider neglect of black British histories within a British context and the effective forgetting or silencing of certain voices (young, black British, working-class, queer, those of the dead) in dominant historical narratives.

As Bernard has reflected in an interview:

I realized that I had never heard this young woman’s name before ... This was a major thing that happened and she’d never been mentioned. While I was at school we learned about the Anglo-Saxons. We learned about Henry VIII and all the wives he murdered but we never learned anything to do with our own communal history. You know, I grew up in South London: how had I never heard of this person (“Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard”)?

“This person” was Yvonne Ruddock, whose sixteenth birthday was being celebrated at a house party at 439 New Cross Road when the fire broke out. The fire’s cause has never been conclusively proven, but it is believed to have been the result of a racially motivated hate crime. One particularly upsetting line of police inquiry at the time was that the fire may have started within the house as a result of conflict between the partygoers themselves. However, it was the brutal and insensitive treatment of survivors and grieving relatives by the London Metropolitan Police, as well as perceptions of a rushed investigation and marked inconsistencies in the subsequent inquiry, which caused the most anger and distress to those involved and their immediate community.

Within days the New Cross Action Committee (NCAC) was set up as a community-based activist organisation designed to support and coordinate legal representation for the bereaved families, and to protest at the “media bias and police mishandling of the police investigation into the fire.”<sup>3</sup> Amongst the founding members of the NCAC were key cultural figures of the time, such as black activist and independent publisher John La Rose and dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. Bernard includes tributes to both in the form of using some of La Rose’s words from the archive and bases a whole poem (“Songbook”) in tribute to “New Cross Massakah” (1981), Linton Kwesi Johnson’s iconic poem of the time. Such intertextual use of these earlier British-Caribbean figures provides the poems in *Surge* with a historical grounding and connection to a longer humanistic revisionary strain in Caribbean British writing. This is important in terms of Bernard’s location of their work within a specifically black British history. Bernard also pays tribute to the cultural importance of dub poetry and the wider musical landscape of 1980s black Britain (such as Sound System culture and the reggae deejays - which the title “Side A” references), as well as citing the stylistic influence of a range of black transatlantic writers from Aime Césaire and C.L.R. James to the more recent work of 2015 Booker-Prize winning novelist Marlon James. In this way, a recognizable political as well as literary continuum is established which allows Bernard’s poetic voices to move backwards and forwards through time and space, memory, and hope for the future.

### **Black British history as haunting: Grenfell (2017)**

Whilst Bernard was writing the poems in *Surge*, another much more high-profile event unfolded which interrupted and complicated the writing of the collection. This was the tragedy of Grenfell

---

<sup>3</sup> In 2011 the thirtieth anniversary of the New Cross Fire was marked with a series of events and publications, including *The New Cross Massacre Story: Interviews with John La Rose* (New Beacon), with a new introduction by Linton Kwesi Johnson.



Tower, when a fire rapidly spread through a high-rise residential building in central London killing some 72 inhabitants. Again delays, official incompetence and insensitivity surrounded the case. There were also suggestions that the responses of the police, emergency services and government ministers might have been very different had the inhabitants not been mainly working class, migrant and ethnic minority inhabitants living in one of the richest boroughs in London. There were some striking parallels between the Grenfell and New Cross fires, as Bernard suggests, not least the initial “blam[ing of] the people in the house” for the fire (“Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard”).

In the preface to *Surge*, Bernard explains how in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster Padmore’s New Cross archive became:

a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history. The most chilling aspect of this was the lack of closure, the lack of responsibility and the lack of accountability at the centre of both the New Cross Fire and Grenfell. And the more I read and discussed, the more vexed the relationship between public narration and private truths appeared (11).

Whilst there are important differences between the two fires, Bernard links them within a longer black British history and reminds us of an even longer transatlantic history for black diasporic subjects. For example, in “Arrival” Bernard sensitively excavates the different historical journeys made by the ancestors of the dead, and points to the terrible inevitability - and cost - of repeatedly treating black people as statistics, from the numbered slaves to the numbered dead in a London fire. “Arrival” with its tapered, wing-like presentation of ever-shortening lines on the page “ma[kes] visible” the forgotten dead as individual human beings and provides a fitting legacy:

Remember we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams  
that we might be named, numbered and forgotten  
that we were made visible that we might be looked on with contempt  
that they gave us their first and last names that we might be called wogs

and to their minds made flesh that it might be stripped from our backs  
close our smokey mouths around their dreams  
swallow them as they gaze upon us  
never to be full -  
snap, crackle  
amen (1)

Likewise, in “Window,” the fire-cornered subjects’ of New Cross- Grenfell desperately jumping to their death from a window is recontextualised within a longer history of death by fire, as the poem's unnamed, ghostly speaker remembers witnessing a young (slave?) boy defying death before being burned alive and imagines him taken home to “the gully where he was born [...] taken...into the house before seeing / that he was half smoke, that he had been floating away” (Bernard 19). Such are the ghosts of a transatlantic history which haunts *Surge*. Both poems are good examples of what Derrida calls “hauntology,” a term he originally coined in *Specters of Marx* (1993). As Edyta Lorek-Jezińska suggests, discussing Derrida:

Hauntology... derives its meaning from the combination of the verb “to haunt” and the word “ontology” to signify the extent to which the sense of being is always haunted by something other that makes it impossible to describe, comprehend or enclose existence in definite categories (Lorek-Jezińska 7).

According to Mark Fisher, Derrida argues that:

the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What [is mourn[ed] is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality. (Fisher 16)

Thus, on the “question of repetition” (here of history), “the specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins [paradoxically] by coming back” (Derrida 11). Perhaps the most obvious example of haunting and spectrality in *Surge* is “Duppy,” a poem named for the Caribbean word for a ghost or a spirit which haunts the human world. In this

remarkable poem, a victim of the New Cross fire witnesses from beyond the grave her community's activism in the form of the Black People's Day of Action of March 1981. Here the disembodied voice of the duppy referenced in the title sees:

Everyone I know [...]  
Cracked puddle reflects the procession  
Rude boys moody like the underside of clouds [...]

I see my picture on a sign my name  
As though the march  
Were my mother's mantelpiece Lewisham, the frame  
Every face come in like a cousin  
Tall boys carry my empty coffin<sup>4</sup> (Bernard 22)

In a meeting of form and content in the poem the "cracked puddle" reflection is mirrored in the fragmented and irregular spacing of words and overall form of "Duppy." When the poem's voice notes "the crowd passes through me," the kind of spectrality which is produced is both intertextual (for example, after the "crowd flow[ing] over London Bridge" in the "Unreal City" section of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) and hauntological. We can also see how disembodiment lies at the heart of this haunting when the voice asks: "No-one will tell me what happened to my body" (Bernard 22). The poem is also hauntological in that the subject's future is now virtual, imagined rather than actual, constantly haunting the "present." It is this future, as much as the fact of the subject's death which is mourned. The "work of mourning", as Derrida reminds us, "is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general" (*Specters of Marx* 97).<sup>5</sup>

### **"Archive Fever"**

---

<sup>4</sup> The coffin is "empty" because there are not enough human remains left by the fire to fill it.

<sup>5</sup> "Mourning always follows a trauma. I have tried to show elsewhere that the work of mourning is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production..." (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 45).

Bernard's use of the George Padmore Institute's archive is the overarching organizing principle of *Surge*. This archive has an interesting, if not unique, provenance in being gifted by one individual: black activist and independent publisher, John La Rose. It includes audio, visual and written texts "relating predominantly to the experience of the black community in Britain and internationally, especially in the Caribbean [...] supplemented by material from Africa and Asia [...] the majority covering the period 1960s-1990s" (George Padmore Institute). Community-based from the outset, the archive provided Bernard with a radically different history of Britain to the one promoted in their own school textbooks and the media. Bernard reflects on their methodology in using these documentary sources to write many of the poems in *Surge*:

When you go to an archive or you look at a particular history there's an expectation of reportage, that you're going to take on the position of the journalist[...] [I was] kind of wanting to actively react against that actually[...]so maybe wanting to flirt with that a little bit, but poetry is a kind of truth and it's in language that is restorative rather than sensationalist. It's so important that we don't let the key moments of our current time get only recorded by journalists, by the media[...]It can't be the only thing that we seek out to find information [...]I don't think poetry is "information" as such but I do think it's useful to think about the degraded nature of the language, the degradation of the discourse when there's something better that people have spent time on [poetry], that's actually good for you ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

Bernard's notion of poetry as something "good for you" is striking here, as is the idea of the "degraded language" of journalism and the poetic archive working against that. Re/turning to the archives seems both a political and aesthetic restorative process for Bernard, one which guards against the sensationalist and linguistically "degraded" and degrading discourse used in media coverage of the same events.

Derrida's concept of "archivology" is a useful one in any critical reading of *Surge*, given the centrality of the archive to Bernard's project (with poems titled "Ark" and "Ark II") and the poet's focus on the *idea* of the archive as well as the individual's poetic use of a specific archive

of black British history. This interest in the archive is very much in line with a wider contemporary “archival turn” in the Humanities and beyond - what Derrida famously terms “Archive Fever” in his book of the same name. Derrida “considers the role and meaning of archiving and archives, in which he includes all texts, writing and forms of duplication, printing, e-mail, and so on in human history” (qtd. in Tyacke 16). Derrida argues that writing is a form of archiving and archiving a form of writing. Victoria Adukwei Bulley captures something of Derrida’s sense of archiving when she argues that *Surge* is effectively “a ledger of injustice and resistance, a book of haunting and disquiet” (Bulley). By “archive fever” Derrida is also concerned with “human-kind’s desire to archive or to have memory which [...] is inseparable from the capacity to ‘forget’ either wilfully or naturally over time [...] in archival terms he sees this “forgetting” translated into the activities of deliberately destroying or keeping records and archives secret from others or even losing them in the course of time” (Tyacke, 16).

However, beyond such specific contexts, the wider concept of the archive remains a slippery one. It is rooted in the slippage in English between the meanings of “archive” as a repository, “archive” as the physical place where records are stored, “archive” as the totality of these records more generally (e.g., the archive of slavery) and “archive” as a process of filing and recording which necessarily involves selection from a wider body of documentation and thus necessary exclusion and/or potential erasure or destruction of certain records. As Sarah Tyacke notes:

the word “Record” is the older established term from the medieval period onwards and meant a report or evidence. Classical Latin “recordor” to recall, remember, ponder over. “Archive” was the place where records were kept and in England dates from the mid-seventeenth century.... the medieval Latin word “arca” ... was a chest or trunk, as in “arks and hutches” of the Treasury of receipt in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries... In the French tradition, the word “archives” means records from creation to archiving, as we in England use the words “record” or “archive” interchangeably to cover the continuum (4).

Jacques Derrida usefully opens *Archive Fever*, his study of the role of new technologies on the human mind and memory, with an examination of the etymology of “archive”:

As in the case from the Latin *archivum* or *archium* (a word that is use in the singular, as was the French *archive*, formerly employed as a masculine singular: *un archive*), the meaning of “archive”), the meaning of “archive”, its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house (private house, family house, or employer's house), that official documents are filed (2).<sup>6</sup>

Significantly “the archons are first of all documents’ guardians”:

They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law. To be guarded thus, in the jurisdiction of this speaking the law, they needed at once a guardian and a localization. Even in their guardianship or their hermeneutic tradition, the archives could do neither without substrate nor without residence. It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret (2-3).

In poems such as “Ark” we see the speaker plays with the idea of themselves as a kind of archon or guardian of the archive. However, I want to suggest that Bernard’s positionality is altogether more ambivalent: both within and outside of the house, the “domiciliation” of the archive (George Padmore Institute), which they had been granted access to for a finite period of time. That ambivalence unsettles the idea of archivism and the power of its archons or guardians.

As the subtitle of his *Archive Fever* suggests, Derrida is writing here about a specific archive: that of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. He is particularly interested in the nomological and topological transition of this private “archive” to the public access to his archive facilitated by the

---

<sup>6</sup> “The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhe*. But it also *shelters* itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to sating also that it forgets it” (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 2).

establishment of the Freud Museum (appropriately enough, located in Freud's former house in London). As Derrida notes:

With such a status, the documents [...] are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged topology. They inhabit this uncommon place. At the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate, the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible (3).

The notion of the visible and the invisible in relation to the archive and the wider sense of the archive being haunted by secrets, of ghosts taking secrets beyond the grave, also speaks to many of the poems in *Surge*.

Nichols Abraham, writing after Freud and then Lacan's famous reading of *Hamlet* argues that "The theme of the dead – who, having suffered repression by their family or society, cannot enjoy, even in death, a state of authenticity – appears to be omnipresent" (171). The dead haunt (literally or metaphorically) precisely because they "took unspeakable secrets to the grave" (Abraham 171). Such secrets may include the manner in which they died, as is the case with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Ultimately, Derrida suggests, the secret and the hidden is already inherent in the notion of the archive: it is haunted by what it cannot say or recover or account for in any coherent way.

### ***Surge*: Haunting as intertextuality**

Bernard also uses the term "haunting" in reference to their writing process for the collection:

Many questions emerged not only about memory and history, but about my place in Britain as a queer black person. This opened out into a final sense of coherence: I am from here, I am specific to this place, I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back (*Surge* xi).

This search for location and locatedness is crucial as Bernard grounds their poems within particular historical events (New Cross, Grenfell) in a specifically black British context. However, as the

intertexts to many of the poems demonstrate, the poems draw upon, and can be located in a wider and thoroughly transatlantic, black Atlantic discourse. When Bernard reflects: “So much of the book is about haunting but also presence and absence” (“Jay Bernard reads 'Clearing'”), we can read this on one level as a statement about Bernard’s literary influences and the central role of intertextuality in the collection. The collection references documents in the George Padmore Institute archive and reproduces both very visible archival sources, such as a “Support Black People’s Day of Action” poster, and more obscure or “hidden” (because less immediately recognisable) intertexts, such as lines from the fact-finding commission conducted by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (55). This technique contributes to the reader’s sense that the archive is composed of presences and absences: the archive presents material but - as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever* (1995, 1996) – the archive also hides by foregrounding particular ways of organizing and making sense of histories and not others. What we are left with is a ghostly sense of archival traces which may or may not link to an embodied, describable or even knowable history. Indeed, Judie Newman et al. have argued that intertextuality is a kind of “haunting” of one text by others. This idea of unspecified or vague intertextuality as a kind of haunting is useful as it can encompass unconscious and unintended intertextuality as well as the more straightforward intertextuality Bernard acknowledges they make in their collection.<sup>7</sup>

### **Archive/s and power**

Derrida’s interest in *arkheion* is in large part an interest in power, in the ways in which a relationship developed between the archive and those who governed, both being located in the same privileged space of domiciliation. The legacy of this origin is that all archives hold power,

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, Bernard’s “Notes” at the end of the collection reveal they make references in individual poems to black Atlantic writers such as Edouard Glissant, Aime Césaire (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*) and C.L.R James (*Black Jacobins*) and “Songbook” writes back to an earlier poem on New Cross by Linton Kwesi Johnson.



though not necessarily in the form which the ancient Greeks would recognise. In “Toward Slow Archives” (2019) Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson argue that:

the structures, practices, and processes of collection, cataloguing, and curation from multiple vantage points including colonial, community-based archives, and institutional archives...expose where current cultural authority is placed, valued, and organized within archival workflows. The long arc of collecting is not just rooted in colonial paradigms; it relies on and continually remakes those structures of injustice not only through the seemingly benign practices and processes of the profession, but also through how terms like access and circulation are understood and expressed (87).

Christen and Anderson’s primary interest (in this case in the context of first nation and indigenous people’s histories) is in modes of decolonizing the archive. They note that:

Recent moves in archival studies and practice have emphasized post-custodial (Sangwand 2014; Kelleher 2017) participatory (Gilliland and McKemmish 2014) and community archives (Bastian and Alexander 2009; Hennessy et al. 2013; Caswell 2014; Thorpe 2017; Cifor et al. 2018) [as all providing] modalities for upending and redirecting archives’ power and structures of dominance, erasure, and authorial control (91).

Most archives are compiled according to what was deemed useful by certain individuals (archivists, collectors) in the past and are not closed in the sense that documents may be removed, added to or reconfigured in different ways. Whilst it is crucial to acknowledge that archives can act in oppressive ways by deliberately excluding certain voices (such as the voices of the colonized in colonial archives), it’s also important to note that archives are not in and of themselves necessarily oppressive structures which actively seek to exclude certain groups and materials (though they may do so through unconscious and conscious bias). One example of this might be the relative dearth of working-class voices in older archives which is in part due to low literacy rates historically amongst this group. Indeed, archives are often rather haphazard in their genesis and inclusiveness. Tyaycke observes that:

The archive or record (whether current or historic) is selected, i.e., it is deliberately less than the totality, depending on the significance given by the selectors and/or the creators to the thought or activity of the creators; parts of the total record, before any process of archiving has taken place, may, of course, inadvertently be left to survive until their value is recognized by succeeding generations and the records are deemed important enough to join the archive. Even here the chances are that someone thought the documents were worth not throwing away. So, archives tend to be a mixture of deliberate selection and survival for whatever reason (9).

However, as Derrida recognises, all archives are important as sites of authority, even community-based archives such as the one Bernard uses. For Saidiya Hartman, the colonial origins of certain archives are important. Using “archive” in the sense of the total documentation on a given subject, she suggests:

The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power. [For example] the archive [may] yield [...] no exhaustive account of [an individual slave’s] life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death. All the rest is a kind of fiction (10).

Although the archive of slavery is only residually drawn upon by Bernard in certain poems (e.g., “Arrival”) it is still a potent trace and a powerful undertow in the collection. Resisting the kind of “founding violence” which Hartman speaks of, Bernard puts in place an “emphasis on multiplicity and relatedness [as...] an active undoing of the notion of any one “expert” or “authority” record and a simultaneous untethering of accumulated knowledge from existing collections” (Parmar). Bernard’s poems in *Surge* are also important in emphasising *process* as “archival and preservation practices oftentimes emphasize an end product over the process and knowledge embedded in the materials themselves” (Parmar).

### **“Ark” and “Ark II”: the poet as archivist**

Despite their background in documentary film, Bernard chose not to adopt a “documentary” approach and instead focuses on the voices in the archive: the named and the unnamed, embodied

and disembodied, the *what* was being said and “the w/whole” of what wasn’t. Sandeep Parmar argues that the use of multiple voices throughout the collection “reminds us that the self is an overlaying of multiple identities, comprised not just of what is remembered and forgotten, but of how one is located in the wider questions of belonging, memory and solidarity” (Parmar). For Bernard as a young black self-identifying trans non-binary person, these questions of belonging are even more vexed. As Bernard reflects:

[In *Surge*] I was unpacking myself my own sense of self a little bit which I think can be dangerous and incredibly fruitful.... these poems activated a real question about what it means to be a black queer person... As I masculinize and as I start to take on a different pronoun, what does mean [sic] in relation to my history of black womanhood. How do I square that up? It was a really big hurdle I had to overcome, because it’s so funny to look at a piece of history where you identify so strongly but you probably wouldn’t have been welcomed there. What would this person [Yvonne Ruddock] have thought of you? So, it really changed my queer politics...it’s solely about who you’re attracted to. It’s about the space you inhabit. So much came out of that” (“Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard”).

In other words, the archive becomes valuable to the poet as one of a range of intersecting sources (“environmental, archival, technological”) for understanding and locating the self. One way of thinking of the archive’s value, then, is that it is valuable only in so much as it allows the subject (or the community, or the nation) to locate themselves in relation to it. This is what Parmar means when she argues that Bernard’s poems in this collection, through their close relationship to a specific located archive of black British history, create “situated and place-based meaning” and give the record back to the community from which they sprung (Parmar).

In the poems “Ark” and “Ark II”, one written in unrhymed couplets and the other presenting as a kind of prose poem utilizing symbols as well as letters, “Bernard draws the lyric subject into a complex relation with the past and present” (Parmar). Here it is the poet as another kind of ‘archivist’ who draws attention to the materiality of the archive’s documents (audio and video recordings, press cuttings and photos) as well as the process of archiving itself:

I take this morning from its box, see how the years have warped  
Its edges, its middle pages conjoined at the text.

I remove the rusted paper clip, dry sponge its brittle red remains,  
Unfold a liver-spotted note in copper ink,

Date it by the flaking Letraset and amber glue,  
Press each part to the flatbed scanner (2),

However, here it is not documents which are being filed but something both more elusive and visceral: “damp smoke and young bones” (2). The end of the poem reprises the process of archiving as the poet-as-archivist turns to matters of identity and national belonging:<sup>8</sup>

I take this January morning in my hands and wonder if it should go under London, England,  
Britain, British, black-British –

However, hardest of all to file is the often-hidden history of racism, violence and brutality as experienced by individuals:

where to put the burning house, the child made ash, the brick in the back of the neck, the shit  
in the letter box and piss up the side of it?  
I file it under fire, corpus, body, house (3).

The final line of the poem reminds us that one of the original meanings of archive in Ancient Greek, is home, a place where the archive is located, a body of documents but also a place of domiciliation, of domestic locatedness, a home made unhomey by traumatic events.

As Parmar argues, “Ark” constitutes “weav[ing] the fragility of the archive’s contents with an expanded definition of the archive itself”:

[it is] a body of knowledge that is housed and organized according to the inclusive and exclusive laws of provenance and belonging. Where, the poet asks, does the body sit across the categorisations of national, local and ethnic identities if the traumas of personal and systemic violence make being at home impossible? The fire becomes an existential threat

---

<sup>8</sup> One important permutation of the archive is as a set of records which signify as markers of cultural nationalism.

beyond this historical moment, and the ephemera lovingly preserved in the archive become an ark in the flood of time (Parmar).

Here, most clearly, the meanings of “Ark” and ‘archive’ collide: one is the means of preserving living bodies against the deluge of a watery flood, the other a means of preserving a body of knowledge against the ravages of time. As Derrida suggests, even the term “Ark” is hidden within the archive in the form of its etymology as *arkheion* (*Archive Fever*, 2-3). Again the sense of what is hidden within the archive is foregrounded.

“Ark II” is a fragmented prose poem in the speaking voice which tries to connect the past with the present within a London topography. Like other poems in this collection, it weaves personal recollection with public history, the man who claims to be the official “underpath artist” set against New Cross and Grenfell. The poem is, in many ways, about the process of memorialization, how we remember and memorialize the past in certain ways. However, the poem is also centrally about narration and different narrative modes, as the voice suggests:

In the story I am trying to tell/ what doesn't fit is part of the hole[...]the story lives in the house/in a video the anchor pulls the curtains closed on a reconstructed morning/ [...] a friend sends me the link to the burning tower effigy<sup>9</sup>/ in the 80s people sent letters[...] the columns read; [7 heart symbols]/ STRENGTH (46)

### **Beyond the archive as mortuary: embodiment and voice**

Saidiya Hartman suggests that “to read the archive [...] is to enter a mortuary” (4); it is to connect with the lives and the words of the dead. This is true of specific poems in *Surge*. For instance, in “Clearing” and “-” the dead speak from the police mortuary in counterpart to the voices of the living and the voices of the families in the paired poem “+”. Crucially, in this collection to be dead

---

<sup>9</sup> “Ark II” references a BBC article from 3 November 2015 as well as the infamous Grenfell Tower “bonfire” effigy video which emerged and was circulated on social media in Autumn 2018.

does not mean one is voiceless or silenced. African-American writer Tracy K. Smith in conversation with Bernard in 2019 argued for the idea of “voice being alive and ongoing, history still breathing and generating something new that we can listen to if we choose to. We need to listen to these people [in this context the imagined voice of unnamed slaves in an old photograph] because what they’re saying makes urgent sense.” Smith stresses the important “role of silence and rhythmic momentum [in poetry, which acts to] urge us out of understanding into something deeper than that[...]we don’t do that enough” (“Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard”). This is also Bernard’s method in *Surge* as they work through different voices, embodied and disembodied, real and imagined, whilst listening for the elisions and silences in the record, the “hole” in the whole. This is represented variously as the deliberate typographical spacing between words (as in “Harbour,” “Duppy” and “Stone”), as redaction (“Ark II”) and as omission of names (“Blank”).

Significantly, as Bulley suggests, *Surge* starts with the word “Remember;” and ends with the repeated refrain “Will anybody speak of this” (Bulley)? So many of the poems in between start with the word “said,” “heard,” “sound” or “voice” and the dialogic relationship between speaking and listening is central to many of the poems. Sometimes, as in “Patois”, voice is inflected with the socio-linguistic particularities of what is known as “London Jamaican English.” However, the fact that it is “three Asian boys” who remind its speaker of the language used in their British Jamaican home, reminds us of the dangers of essentialising any voice or identity:

This century dubbed by migrants from the last.  
We do not speak with one voice about one thing  
Below the yellow, black and green flag of England (4).

In the next poem “Harbour” the voice seems to be that of a witness to the fire, a voice “so weak, so sickened / so grieved.” by what they can see that they say:

to the child I knew  
harboured in the fire –jump

Yvonne, jump Paul, jump-  
And I said to my god I knew  
Harboured in the fire – jump (6).

Importantly, the use of the names of actual victims grounds the poem in a lived reality, the very opposite of a later poem “Blank” in which all proper names are left blank. The repetition of “jump” evokes the simplicity of a children's skipping rope game but the injunction is deadly serious and tragic in consequence. Even the gently arcing shape of the poem on the page ironically echoes the arc of a safe harbour and the imminent life-threatening jump from a burning building which is described here.

In the first of two poems called “Songbook” the central concept of voice and the sonic properties of poetry really come into their own. “Songbook” in performance (Bernard performs “Songbook”) is sung rather than spoken and has a dancehall or mento rhythm appropriate to its opening description of the New Cross party before the fire. Bernard has said that the poem is inspired by Linton Kwesi Johnson’s “New Cross Massakah” (55) and traces of this earlier poem are certainly present here in terms of a shared British-Caribbean musical aesthetic, the centrality of voice and the devastating subject matter. However, it also uses the quatrain form so beloved of other Jamaican poets such as the legendary Louise Bennett. Bernard’s use of the quatrain echoes the innocence of the nursery rhyme form or the familiarity of the hymn form, now undermined and given traumatic new meaning. Parmar suggest both “Songbook” poems in the collection (“Songbook” and “Songbook II”) “draw on musical forms associated with transatlantic black culture and civil rights [...] from celebratory reggae to the revolutionary anthems of race equality that would follow that fateful night” (Parmar). Bernard has spoken about the poem originating out of their father’s love of creating rhythmically repetitive songs like this and his love of reggae and

1980s' sound system culture ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard"). "Songbook II" makes use of a ballad-like repetitive structure and focuses on "Miss D," a former community stalwart and now a grieving mother of one of the New Cross victims. The "call and response" format of the poem suggests a longer black Atlantic cultural connectedness but also achieves immense poignancy in pairing the sing-song rhythm with trauma and loss. As in the first "Songbook" poem, the form of "Songbook II" lulls us into the traumatic subject matter at the heart of the poem.

I haven't seen her, nor have you  
Not since the fire at 439  
I heard her daughter was gone for days  
They wouldn't let her see the remains (31)

As in so many of the poems in *Surge*, "Songbook II" plays on presence and absence. In its repeated, almost antiphonal exchanges, Miss D transitions from an active member or agent in the community to the subject of local gossip and mythology:

How many times has Miss D died?  
As often as there have been babies born  
How many times will she die once more?  
As long as things are worth dying for [...]

And she came up in the morning  
And she went down in the evening  
And when I turn around she was gone (31).

Later poems in the collection such as "Chemical" and "Blank" echo some of the most viscerally disturbing poems of New Cross's aftermath ("Hiss" and "Washing") in reminding us of the horror of death by fire. Bernard utilises the convention of blanking out individual names in their poetic account of Grenfell, thereby showing how certain kinds of discourse can enact another kind of disembodiment and dehumanisation of the victims and participants. A key cause of this



depersonalization, the poet suggests, is the “degraded,” soulless, official language used by the media and other agencies in such cases:

The family of----- today issued this statement -  
The family of -----ask for your respect -  
Organisers hope to deliver the petition to the Home Secretary.  
It has nothing to do with us today issued this statement:  
Those involved have defended their actions and been given/  
Been given/ acquitted/retired with full pay/charged/acquitted/  
Desk duty/retired with full pay/been given/been given (49)

By not just replicating but intensifying this journalistic language, Bernard makes the point that the victims – as in New Cross – were all individuals with individual stories to tell, not homogenised victims or numbers. The poem's close features language pared down to a very few words which tell us everything as well as nothing specific about individual victims:

I read that you were loved, I read that you were -  
I read about you -----, I read that you were – (41)

The overall effect of this poem is to suggest that language itself has broken down in the face of trauma.

Hartman’s reflections on her own writing process in relation to an archive of black Atlantic slavery are worth quoting at length, as they seem very similar to Bernard’s project in *Surge*:

As a writer [...] I have endeavoured to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known. For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom [...] As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state [...] as the anticipated future of this writing. This writing is personal because this history has engendered me, because “the knowledge of the other marks me,” because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive, and because of the kinds of stories I have fashioned to bridge the past and the present and to dramatize the production of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste. What are the kinds of stories to be told (13-14)?

As Bernard has said of their aim in *Surge*:

[I was] not so much trying to speak on behalf of, or for these people that I [...] came across at the archive but through and with and at the same time as [...] I think it's really like an exercise in humanity. It's that simple. It cannot be commodified [...]. The material really came alive for me [in the archive and] I started to see the City not just as socio-political thing but also as an embodied thing too..." ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard")

Despite such similarities, what distinguishes Bernard's poetry from Hartman's writing is its insistence on a black British context and a thoroughly black British (rather than Black Atlantic) aesthetic. In this respect, Bernard's experience as a film programmer for the British Film Institute and as a documentary film maker is relevant. Unsurprisingly, Bernard has acknowledged a number of black British films and filmmakers as key influences on their work, including John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Collective, best known for the seminal 1986 film *Handsworth Songs*.<sup>10</sup> Films like *Handsworth Songs* construct alternative micro-narratives of British history through techniques such as montage and sampling and ask what stories get told in the media. As such they form part of a parallel history of black British postmodern archival play that, like Bernard's work, proves ultimately emancipatory. Fisher has suggested that *Handsworth Songs* is also characterised by certain hauntological aspects:

When the BAFC's 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* was shown at Tate Modern in the wake of the English riots in the summer of 2011, Akomfrah posed a question about hauntological causality—what is it about certain places, such as Tottenham, which means that riots keep happening? How, when the whole population of an area has changed, do such repetitions occur? *Handsworth Songs* can be read as a study of hauntology, of the specter of race itself (an effective virtuality if ever there was one), an account of how the traumas of migration (forced

---

<sup>10</sup> In their LRB conversation with Tracy K. Smith Bernard references Reece Auguiste's *Twilight in the City* ([BFI 1989) as an "incredible film, an important documentary about Britain, race, sexuality – all of that. And watching that [was] incredibly interesting and useful in understanding how I put my own work together and also the work of someone like John Akomfrah. He's got the notion of the pen and how does it jump which is so key in ordering my poems [...] In terms of thinking about what is missed out and what we [...] fill in with that as well [...] and I think poems can...do that" ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

and otherwise) play themselves out over generations, but also about the possibilities of rebellion and escape (24).

When Fisher notes *Handsworth Songs*' "experimental essayistic form, driven as much by [its]... sound design as by the images" and its "sampling of archive sources such as BBC radio's production of *Under Milk Wood* and documentary images of Caribbean immigrants arriving in Britain" we can see some parallels to Bernard's project, not in any simplistic or derivative way, but as part of a shared stream of black British artistic experimentation and innovation. Both texts use sampling and complex forms of intertextuality; both texts foreground formal experimentation as well as – in their different ways – the sonic dimensions of the text.

Ultimately *Surge* reflects upon and re-historicizes a longer continuum of black British history. The collection:

speaks to the continuum on which both the New Cross Fire and Grenfell fires exist – an ongoing chain of events marked by moments such as the Macpherson Report, the London Riots of 2011, and [from 2018 on] the Home Office deportations of Windrush-era elders who arrived in the UK as citizens. It is a mirror held carefully up to our current age, armed with the transgressive fluidities of black queer selfhood. (Bulley)

Central to *Surge*'s formal experimentation is Bernard's use of voice, and its hauntological role in unsettling and transcending not only the archive but, in a sense, death itself. In *Surge*, even the unnamed victims of the New Cross and Grenfell fires achieve a kind of immortality, albeit a restless and unsettled one. That is Bernard's point: that history continues to haunt and be haunted until there is some form of justice, resolution or closure for the living *and* the dead. As Bulley observes: "the voices across *Surge* converge, creating a collage – at times a chorus – of utterances reflecting the experiences of black people at the hands of the British state" and cannot be enclosed within a linear timeline. In such ways, Bernard's poetry and filmmaking moves beyond singular

or sedimenting ways of thinking about black British pasts and suggests newly mobile ways of thinking about both the materiality of a black British archive and its hauntological spectres.

## Works Cited

- Abraham, Nicolas, et al. *The Shell and the Kernel*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Anderson, Jane, and Christen Kimberly. (2019). "Toward slow archives." *Archival Science*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2019, pp. 87–116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x>. Accessed 24 December 2019.
- Bernard, Jay. *Surge*. London, Chatto & Windus, 2019.
- Bulley, Victoria Adukwei. "Ledbury Emerging Critic Review of *Surge*", *Poetry School*, 26 Sept. 2019, <https://poetryschool.com/reviews/ledbury-emerging-poetry-critic-review-surge-by-jay-bernard/>. Accessed 24 December 2019.
- Cokes, Tony. "Afrosurrealism Filmmaker's Journal: resonanz.01 (2008–2013) notes / fragments on a case of sonic hauntology." *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 1, Fall 2013, pp. 220-225.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge, 1993.
- Fisher, Mark. "What is hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, Fall 2012, pp. 16-24. doi:10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16.
- George Padmore Institute. *George Padmore Institute*, <https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/>. Accessed 15 November 2020.
- "Great New Poetry Books Recommended for You." *National Poetry Day*, <https://nationalpoetryday.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NPD-2019-Recommendations-Great-New-Poetry-Books-for-You.pdf>. Accessed 15 November 2019.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 1-14.

“Jay Bernard reads 'Clearing'.” *YouTube*, uploaded by T. S. Eliot Prize, 7 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7Ufi6wscvE>.

La Rose, John. *The New Cross Massacre Story: Interviews with John La Rose*. New Beacon, 2011.

Lorek-Jezińska, Edyta. *Hauntology and Intertextuality in Contemporary British Drama by Women Playwrights*. Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, 2013.

“Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard read and discuss their poetry.” *YouTube*, uploaded by London Review of Books, 13 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTZKYEimq2Y>.

Newman, Judie. *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions*. Hodder Education Publishers, 1995.

Parmar, Sandeep. “Review of *Surge* by Jay Bernard – Tragedy and Solidarity.” *The Guardian*, 6 July 2019, [www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/06/surge-by-jay-bernard-review-the-painful-echoes-of-britains-black-radical-past](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/06/surge-by-jay-bernard-review-the-painful-echoes-of-britains-black-radical-past).

“Poet Jay Bernard performs ‘Bras’.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Penguin Books UK, 30 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9TCkHrLr-M>.

Tyacke, Sarah. “Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives.” *Archivaria*, <https://Archivaria.ca/Index.php/Archivaria/Issue/View/429>, 2001. Accessed 24 December 2019.

# From Freakshow to Sitcom: Metatheatrical (Dis)Continuities in Contemporary African American Plays

Jade THOMAS

Vrije Universiteit Brussel / Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the past thirty years, experimental plays by Black playwrights<sup>2</sup> have been progressively thriving both on Broadway and Off-Broadway – their successes ranging from Anna Deavere Smith’s well-received verbatim theater and Suzan-Lori Parks’s first OBIE award in the 1990s to Jeremy O. Harris’s nomination for a record twelve Tony Awards for his *Slave Play* in 2020 and recent Pulitzer Prize wins by Jackie Sibblies Drury and Michael R. Jackson. Although African American playwrights<sup>3</sup> are well-received on the American stage, the social reality that Black people daily face in the U.S. is less embracing. Debates on police violence and systemic racism sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement since 2013 confirm that normative ways of being discriminated based on racial heritage still mark the lives of African Americans. It is therefore no surprise that

---

<sup>1</sup> The research conducted for the present article is funded by the FWO research grant FWOTM1084 (“Representing Blackness”: Metatheater and Genre Remediation in 21st-Century African American Plays).

<sup>2</sup> Although this article follows MLA style, MLA does not yet capitalize the adjective “Black” when designating people and cultures of African descent rather than skin color alone. I do capitalize the adjective “Black” as well as the derived noun “Blackness,” referring to the shared cultural identity of Black people (see Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black”). However, quoted passages that do not apply this capitalization are inserted in this article without changing the spelling of the original text.

<sup>3</sup> MLA style does not hyphen names if each separate part of the name of an ethnic or national group is an independent term, even if the name is used as a noun or adjective (“Are African American and Native American hyphenated?”). In this case, I follow MLA Style as the use of the non-hyphenated spelling variant treats both cultural terms as equal parts of one’s identity.

the Black playwrights mentioned above explicitly address stereotypical ways of representing Blackness on stage and receive increasing critical attention for their engagement with what is generally referred to as “the white gaze.”<sup>4</sup> The present article explores how contemporary African American playwrights paint a complex picture of the persistent impact of the white gaze on the Black body by inserting metatheatrical devices in their playtexts. As the article will seek to demonstrate by comparing Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018) to Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1995), representations of Black bodies in African American experimental theater have changed in the last decade, and the different employment of metatheatrical devices plays a central role in this respect.<sup>5</sup>

Since twenty-three years separate the playtexts of *Venus* and *Fairview*, the critical reception of the ways in which performances of the playtexts reference cultural stereotypes varies. One year after its completion, *Venus* opened Off-Broadway at the Joseph Papp Public Theater to mixed reviews. Although Parks was praised for not displaying the main character, Sarah Baartman, as a helpless victim of her situation, director Richard Foreman was criticized for presenting the play’s themes of racial and sexual exploitation too obviously (Brantley, “Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein”). Several scholars also evaluate *Venus*’s playtext based on Foreman’s *mise en scene*. Jean Young, for instance, argues that Parks reifies imperial attitudes (700), but, according to Harvey Young, Jean Young mistakes Foreman’s production for *Venus*’s textual representation of its Black protagonist, thus prompting Young to contend that “*Venus* operates as one of the

---

<sup>4</sup> The white or imperial gaze is generally connected to colonial surveillance, which implies that the colonized subject’s identity is fixed in relation to the colonizer because the latter possesses the power to observe the former from an elevated viewpoint. In the system of colonial surveillance, the white gaze “defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness” (Ashcroft et al. 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, not just Drury but other contemporary African American playwrights write in a metatheatrical mode. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ *An Octoroon* (2014), for example, adapts Dion Boucicault’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century eponymous melodrama by experimenting with both genre expectation and audience involvement (Foster, “Meta-Melodrama”).



exceptional cases in which the original production actually creates an obstacle to a clear interpretation of the play text” (“Touching History” 137). *Fairview*, in turn, was largely well-received upon its Off-Broadway premiere at Soho Repertory Theatre. Termed a “glorious, scary reminder of the unmatched power of live theater to rattle, roil and shake us wide awake” (Brantley, “Theater as Sabotage in the Dazzling *Fairview*”), the play was seen as another addition to a range of recent American plays that take up racial alienation and division (ibid.). Its British Young Vic premiere, on the other hand, although praised for the ensemble’s performances, caused critics to question the unchallenged dominance of white narratives on which Drury’s play is premised in view of recent theater hits that rewrite history from a Black point of view such as *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda (Billington, “A daring challenge to the white gaze”). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Drury herself expressed the hope that the racial stereotypes *Fairview* thematizes will become obsolete soon so that her play will not know a long production history.

However, while the critical reception of *Venus* and *Fairview* clearly differs, the plays do connect in topic and style. Firstly, they both thematize the influence of the white gaze on the conceptualization of Blackness by inscribing the audience as a key constituent of the performative action into their playtexts. Secondly, the playwrights both insert metatheatrical strategies such as mimicry, the play within the play and direct audience address in their playtexts to innovatively represent Blackness on stage. Thirdly, the article also explores the connections between the plays’ appropriations of historical and contemporary performance genres in portraying Blackness. *Venus* draws on the format of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century freak show,<sup>6</sup> whereas *Fairview* frames the theatrical action

---

<sup>6</sup> The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines the freak show as an “exhibition of exotic or deformed animals as well as humans considered to be in some way abnormal or outside broadly accepted norms”, and as a distinct American phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Chemers). The subsequent analysis distinctly views the re-enactment of Sarah Baartman’s historical display in *Venus* as a freak show spectacle rather than a ‘human zoo’. Whereas human zoos were specifically devoted to exhibiting the ‘primitive’ manners of colonized people, Baartman’s Black body and enlarged buttocks are displayed parallel to other, non-Black people in *Venus*’s freak show format.

as a modern-day sitcom narrative. Although some contributions have already noted the insertion of popular genres separately for each of the two plays under scrutiny (Kornweibel, “A Complex Resurrection”; Breaux, “Seeking a Fairer View”), no study to date has compared the plays in this respect and explored the ways in which both use popular media and performance genres for framing Black bodies through a normative white lens.

Methodologically, the analysis of metatheater in both playtexts draws on Joanne Tompkins’ theory of metatheater in postcolonial drama (1995). Tompkins argues that, in a postcolonial context, metatheatrical strategies do not only disrupt the theatrical illusion but also function as a “strategy of resistance” that deliberately dislocates colonial power (42). She distinguishes three types of postcolonial metatheater that consciously renegotiate past and present: counter-discursive metatheater, allegorical metatheater, and mimicking metatheater. Borrowing from Helen Tiffin’s discussion of counter-discursive rewriting in the postcolonial novel (42), Tompkins calls metatheater that rewrites classical texts to challenge colonial representation and discourse “counter-discursive” (42-43). Whereas recipients can only perceive a play’s counter-discursive dimension when they recognize the source text, other metatheatrical strategies are rather “allegorical” and deal with rewriting history and ways of seeing (44). In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Bill Ashcroft et al. contend that Euro-centric historiography is sustained by allegorical representations such as paintings or colonial statues that celebrate imperial dominance (7). Appropriating allegory as a postcolonial strategy enables writers to contest the Euro-centric view of history and progress and hence becomes a valuable form for postcolonial writers to exert forms of counter-discourse (7-8). Theater can be said to be a particular effective medium to incorporate postcolonial allegory because of its spectatorial dimension. Especially the play within the play device, which refers to an inner play within the larger action, can create a double vision

that derives from a split gaze because the spectator simultaneously watches the actors as they are watching the action on stage. A play within a play hence functions as a postcolonial allegory, revising representations of cultural others in dominant imperial historiography (Tompkins 45). Likewise, direct audience address can refer allegorically to colonial ways of perceiving others because of its acknowledgment of a secondary, fictional level. Mimicking metatheater similarly refers to the double vision postcolonial subversion creates because of mimicry's "desire to imitate *and* to parody" (47, original emphasis). By comedically overperforming racist stereotypes, for example, colonial discourse is ironized (47-48). Although the application of postcolonial theories on African American artists is often contested because of the U.S.'s status as a global neo-imperialist nation (Gilbert and Tompkins 7), this case study analyzes Parks's explicit thematization of the white gaze and considers in how far Drury similarly draws on metatheatrical strategies of postcolonial resistance based on Tompkins' three types of postcolonial metatheater.

In addition, the analysis of how *Venus* and *Fairview* incorporate features of popular (media) genres such as freak show, sitcom, melodrama, and minstrelsy will draw on Irina O. Rajewsky's systematization of inter- and transmedial references. Rajewsky defines intermedial references as a narrower subcategory of intermediality, which in the broader sense denotes those configurations that transgress the borders of different media as opposed to transmedial phenomena – e.g., a motif or aesthetic – that appear across media (46). In the specific case of intermedial references, only one medium is physically present but evokes the structures of another medium through its own medium-specific means (52-53). As the analysis will show, the two playtexts evoke the televisual genres of melodrama and sitcom.

For now, the article hypothesizes that both Parks and Drury employ postcolonial metatheatrical strategies but with a different dramaturgical effect, firstly, to implicate audiences in

the dynamics of the white gaze and, secondly, to point at the persistent influence of popular (media) genres in framing Black bodies through intermedial references. By comparing these playtexts with regard to their uses of metatheater and intermediality, this article raises the following question: how do self-reflexive and intermedial strategies comment on the ethics of spectating?

### ***Venus*: Postcolonial Rewriting as Effective Resistance?**

Parks's *Venus* retells the life history of Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan woman who was displayed as the 'Hottentot Venus' in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century London and Paris in freak shows and pseudo-educational ethnographic shows because of European fascination with her steatopygia, an enlargement of the buttocks and thighs. After her death in 1815, Baartman's body was dissected by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier, and her remains were exhibited until 1982 at the Parisian Musée de l'Homme (Strother 1). In 31 scenes, *Venus* theatricalizes her life story, starting with her relocation from South Africa to The Mother-Showman's London Circus of 9 Human Wonders, followed by her trial on account of indecent behavior, her pseudo-scientific display in Parisian anatomical theaters by the Baron-Docteur (a character based on the historical Georges Cuvier), and ends with her untimely death. The playtext's opening image recalls Baartman's display as a human curiosity: a Black woman rotates counterclockwise while the other characters introduce themselves to the spectators (*Venus* 1-2). Yet when they finally arrive at the 'Venus Hottentot', they inform the audience that "[...] the Venus Hottentot iz dead. There wont b inny show tonite" (*Venus* 3). The playtext subsequently invites the audience to witness a theatricalized account of the events leading up to the Venus's death: "THE VENUS HOTTENTOT [...] AND ONLY ONE STEP UHWAY FROM YOU RIGHT NOW / COME SEE THE HOT MISS HOTTENTOT / STEP IN STEP IN" (*Venus* 7). By addressing the spectators immediately from the start, the

playtext superimposes the historical audience of Baartman's display with the present audience, casting the latter in the role of passive voyeurs of her racialized Black body.

As the play's opening address refers directly to a secondary fictional level, where Baartman's historical display is reperformed, *Venus* can be characterized as "allegorical metatheater", in the sense that Parks revisions historical, colonial ethics of spectating by doubling Baartman's exhibition with the act of watching her display (cf. Tompkins 45). The opening scene's use of direct audience address, and its freak show setting reminds the audience of the illusory quality of the theater and awkwardly juxtaposes racist colonial history with the pleasurable atmosphere of an entertaining theater evening. By directly addressing the spectators, *Venus* doubles the gaze of the audience and refracts their own spectating through the fictional freak show visitors onstage. The play's freak show format enhances the theatricality of Baartman's exhibition and allegorically alludes to the act of revisioning colonial history, and thus, contrary to her historical objectification, the play troubles the white gaze in the very act of staging.

*Venus*'s use of mimicry has already been examined by multiple scholars (cf. Saal, "The Politics of Mimicry"; Kornweibel, "A Complex Resurrection") who contend that by consciously imitating and parodying colonial discourse, the character of Baartman reclaims pride over her surveilled body while the performance as a whole mirrors both the historical and the contemporary theater audience's voyeurism (Saal 61-62). Parks's Baartman is thus given more agency in her entrapped position as freak show 'wonder' than the historical figure had. A notable example thereof is Baartman's self-assured answer to the court's inquiry regarding whether she has ever been indecent: "To hide your shame is evil. I show mine. Would you like to see?" (*Venus* 76). The court members – previously playing the freak show's onstage spectators – are both horrified and fascinated by her open invitation to observe her Black body. Several historical accounts, however,

indicate that Baartman complied unwillingly with her exhibition, often appearing sad, suppressed, or sullen (Strother 32). By making the fictional Baartman experience pleasure in overperforming a stereotyped version of her body, agency in *Venus* is foremostly geared at implicating the audience in highly racialized ways of looking at Black female bodies.

Metatheatrical strategies further pervade the playtext as *Venus* is regularly interrupted by the performance of the play within the play *For the Love of the Venus*, which is loosely based on the 1814 Parisian Vaudeville play *The Hottentot Venus* by Théaulon de Lambert (Strother 30) and amounts to a racist warning against the dangers of miscegenation. Adolphe, naïve and intrigued by stories of so-called ‘femmes sauvages’ wants to marry a Black woman. His cousin, Amélie, tries to change his mind by dressing up as ‘The Hottentot Venus’, but to no avail. It is only when a chevalier shows Adolphe a ‘horrendous’ picture of the true Venus that he decides to change his marriage plans (30-31). Lambert’s source text thus spells out a racist attitude of sexualizing Black bodies which holds as long as the fetishization does not interfere with white matrimony. In Parks’s playtext, a character named the Bride-to-Be is anxious that her fiancée, The Young Man, will not marry her because he is fascinated by the performances of the Hottentot Venus in town. Lambert’s Amélie corresponds to Parks’s Bride-to-Be who aims to trick The Young Man in believing that she is the Venus (*Venus* 122). Eventually, the Young Man buries his fixation after his white bride has shrugged off her Venus disguise to ‘reveal her core’ (*Venus* 154). *Venus* hence bears features of counter-discursive metatheater because *For the Love of the Venus* rewrites an existent racist text to dislocate colonial power. However, whereas spectators likely recognize that characters’ relationships in the inner play mirror those of the main plot,<sup>7</sup> it is highly questionable that *Venus*’s audience is able to identify *For the Love of the Venus* as a rewrite since Parks’s playtext does not

---

<sup>7</sup> The Young Man’s sudden disinterest in the ‘Venus Hottentot’, for instance, uncannily echoes the Baron Docteur’s accusation of Baartman as indecent to hide that he may have infected her with gonorrhoea (*Venus* 143).

explicitly refer to Lambert's source text. Moreover, it is not so much the content of Parks's rewrite that refutes the racist message of Lambert's original source text, as its warning against miscegenation remains intact, but its formal embeddedness as a play within a play, allegorically creating a double vision on historical, colonial ways of framing Black people. Consequently, the counter-discursive dimension of *Venus's* play within the play as a strategy of resistance is potentially limited.

According to Tompkins, counter-discursive texts from the 1990s onwards increasingly draw on popular rather than canonical source texts (44). Parks's decision to adapt a popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century play and frame the main action partly through a freak show spectacle attests to this development. Moreover, the playscript stipulates that *For the Love of the Venus* should be played on stage while the Baron Docteur watches the play and is concurrently observed by the 'Venus':

A play on a stage. The Baron Docteur is the only  
person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in a chair.

It's almost as if he's watching TV.

The Venus stands off to the side. She watches the Baron Docteur. (*Venus* 25)

By framing the Baron Docteur's spectating in relation to the TV medium, the play within the play constitutes an intermedial reference which serves to uncover the power popular media exert on framing (discourses on) Black bodies.

The increasing appropriation of popular forms in postcolonial (meta-)drama is also evidenced by Parks's play within the play itself, for *For the Love of the Venus* bears narrative features of the popular melodrama genre. Melodrama is foremostly a "mode of cultural production" (Poole and Saal 2), emerging almost instantaneously with the foundation of the U.S.

Having had a lasting appeal in Hollywood, the genre still “contribut[es] to the formation and reconfiguration of American identity(ies)” up until today (ibid.). In its most traditional form, a melodrama scrutinizes the surface of daily middle-class life and centers on the resistance of virtue and innocence through excessive pathos and affect (ibid.). In *For the Love of the Venus*, Black femininity is depicted as a threat to ‘morally just’ white matrimony as The Young Man’s mother metaphorically compares her daughter-in-law to the sun as opposed to Venus’s dark, sinful nature:

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. A Hottentot!

THE MOTHER. Blow yr nose.

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. *Hottentot Venus!*

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. Wipe yr eyes.

My Sons gone wild

but I have a plan.

Listen up!

(Rest)

His head has turned from yr bright sun.

He roams in thuh dark.

Let me speak plain:

He dudhnt love you inny more.

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. Aaah me! (*Venus* 121)



Apart from stressing the Bride-to-Be's virtue, the latter's pathetic reaction to her fiancée's infidelity recalls melodrama's excessive acting style. Parks hence interrogates the relationship between popular melodrama's ideology of white matrimony and mass diffusions of colonial attitudes towards race, thus expanding the traditional definition of counter-discursive metatheater to conscious appropriations of popular genres.

Another formal strategy that highlights the counter-discursive quality of Parks's play is that *For the Love of the Venus* is preceded by an introductory scene, in which the Negro Resurrectionist – functioning as a sort of narrator – provides the spectators with contextual information in a so-called 'footnote' to the play, or a self-announced dramatic aside:

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST. Footnote #1:

*(Rest)*

Historical Extract. Category: Theatrical.

*(Rest)*

The year was 1810. On one end of town, in somewhat shabby circumstances, a young woman, native of the dark continent, bares her bottoms. At the same time but in a very different place, on the other end of town in fact, we witness a very different performance.

Scene 29:

Presenting: "For the Love of the Venus."

A Drama in 3 Acts. Act I, Scene 3: (*Venus* 24)

That the performance of *For the Love of the Venus* is called a 'footnote' further attests to *Venus*'s intermedial dimension. Here and elsewhere, the playtext features different kinds of 'footnotes' that are explicitly framed as historical extracts of different written media types (including advertisements, musical theater, anatomy reports, etc.) that racialize Baartman in various ways. In this case, the intermedial reference helps the audience to identify *Venus*'s counter-discursive strategies, as the 'footnotes' explicitly imitate the structural features of the media that have

historically framed Baartman in a stereotypical way. Since *For the Love of the Venus*'s intermedial reference is created by means of the metatheatrical play within the play, postcolonial allegory expands its reflection on the ethics of spectating to popular genres.

*Venus*'s postcolonial metatheatrical strategies are foremostly used to implicate the audience in highly racialized ways of looking at Black bodies. The agency that the fictional Baartman acquires through mimicry contributes to the dramaturgical juxtaposition of the historical and contemporary audience. However, apart from *Venus*'s occasional resistance against her objectification, it remains questionable in how far parody and counter-discursive writing move Baartman's portrayal beyond the colonial binary of the colonizer/colonized, as The Negro Resurrectionist closes the play with the same death announcement he utters in the play's opening scene, while the fictional Baartman asks the audience to visit her corpse in the museum (*Venus* 160-162).

### ***Fairview*: Staging the Limitations of Postcolonial Metatheater**

*Fairview* also thematizes the persistence of the white gaze but rather focuses on contemporary (popular) attitudes towards Blackness. Sustaining a realist framework,<sup>8</sup> *Fairview* is set in a suburban living room (*Fairview* 7) and unfolds as a trivial, contemporary sitcomsque narrative. The Black Frasier family is preparing Grandma's birthday party, but everything seems to go wrong: dad Dayton brought the wrong silverware, Uncle Tyrone, a lawyer, will probably not arrive on time, daughter Keisha's uninvited friend Erika will be dropping by, and mom Beverly faints on realizing her cake is burnt. Act two, however, takes an unexpected turn as the Frasier family

---

<sup>8</sup> *Venus* breaks with conventions of realist performance from the very beginning, starting with an Overture during which the characters introduce themselves by explicitly acknowledging the presence of the audience (*Venus* 1-2).

reperforms the actions of act one in pantomime whilst rapid, spontaneous voices – named Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets – can be heard (*Fairview* 32).<sup>9</sup> At first, the voices do not seem to have a clear-cut connection to what is happening on stage, but as soon as they debate the hypothetical question ‘what race would you choose, if you had the choice?’, it is clear that they (often awkwardly) relate to the onstage action (*ibid.*). Several dialogical exchanges between the voices imply that they belong to white characters, for instance, when Mack doubts whether a Slav is really a ‘different’ category of race (*Fairview* 48). Similarly, Jimbo jokingly proposes to kidnap Suze and dye her skin black in order to turn her into an African American (*Fairview* 50). When discussing what a Black woman should be like, it turns out that Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets – just as the audience – are watching the Frasier family. Hence, the first act was not a sitcom-esque family drama but a play within a play all along, which the white voices are commenting on:

MACK. [...] Like black women are ... fierce.

(I think there could be something really... empowering,

being a black woman.)

Like look at the way they [Beverly and Jasmine] talk to each other.

(Beat, they watch.)

There’s just so much ... attitude.

(Beat, they watch.)

---

<sup>9</sup> During the entire second act, these characters are only present through their voices. The playtext does not state that they appear onstage, whereas the entrances of the Frasier family are explicitly marked (e.g., *Fairview* 32; 39; 41).

I just love that. Do you see what I mean?

(Beat, they watch.) (*Fairview* 56)

As the above fragment illustrates, the invisible white characters are watching the sitcomsque action and, as Mack's comments demonstrate when he associates Beverly and Jasmine with loud, entertaining and 'fabulous' individuals, their comments include stereotypical views of Black femininity. The voices' stereotypical – and racist – viewpoints become even more apparent when they equate dancing Black people with sexuality:

MACK. And then you'll realize dancing helps you

to keep on getting laid.

JIMBO. And if you like doing black things you might be-

MACK. That's not what I'm talking about ok,

I am saying that dancing-

BETS. That dancing is sensual and fun- (*Fairview* 61)

The above conversation follows after the white characters watch Keisha (re)perform a dancing ritual together with aunt Jasmine to which Bets, Mack, and Jimbo awkwardly cry out: "Yeess (Yaaas) (Yeeeah), black people love [...] to siiiiiing and dance around!" (*Fairview* 58). Their comments on a contemporary, middle-class Black family reiterate the racist projections cast on Baartman's 'entertaining' body in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century freak show that Parks's play mimicks.

The play-within-a-play structure in act two further reinforces the intermedial reference that already characterized the performance of the Frasier family in act one because the white voices –

just like the insertion of canned laughter in TV sitcoms – can only be heard but not seen. The fact that the white voices remain unseen when commenting on the action onstage creates a voyeuristic effect also typical of other televisual genres such as reality TV. Consequently, *Fairview*, just as the melodramatic *For the Love of the Venus*, mirrors and exposes the ethics of spectating and framing (racial) others. The audience first watches the Frasier's' celebration routines in act one, followed by the white voices' racist comments on their day-to-day life in the second act, and is thus made to feel guilty about having laughed at the situational comedy in the first act. However, while, in *Venus*, the prime observer of the play within the play – the Baron Docteur – is visible to the spectators, *Fairview*'s second act does not visualize the white voices, suggesting that “whiteness doesn't need to be seen for its effects to be felt” (Frisina 202).

Moreover, even though, unlike *Venus*, Drury's playtext does not rework colonial history, it can also be categorized as counter-discursive metatheater in Tompkins' sense because it does not just appropriate the popular genre of the sitcom but also that of minstrelsy. Sitcom and minstrelsy are typically associated with different media and historical periods, i.e., 20<sup>th</sup>-century television (for sitcom) and 19<sup>th</sup>-century theater (for minstrelsy). Blackface minstrelsy was a widely popular racist performance genre through which Black culture was appropriated by white Americans to depict slavery as amusing and natural (Lott 23). Especially early minstrel shows (1843-1860s) reveal an obsession with the Black body, which is clear from the genre's primary emphasis on dancing, singing and other burlesque actions that comedically imitated Black life rather than investing in serious narrative (Lott 27). According to Eric Lott, minstrelsy performance embodied a so-called “racial unconscious”, or an ambiguous mixture of white desires, fantasy, and fear of the Black body (36). Drury's play mainly refers to minstrelsy via sudden outbursts of (comedic) dancing that intersperse its recognizable, simple, and amusing plot. Twice Jimbo even

compares the onstage action to a cakewalk (*Fairview* 63; 67), a dance originally performed by enslaved people to mock the manners of Southern whites that was culturally appropriated in racist blackface performances to falsely portray plantation life as enjoyable (Thompson 109). On Jimbo's second reference to the cakewalk, all Black characters burst into a random dance, which continues while they set the table (*Fairview* 77-78). In this scene, the playtext replicates the burlesque features of minstrelsy by highlighting the absurdity of setting the table whilst dancing without any apparent reason, and this absurdity is further underscored by the exaggerated abundance of (fake) food on the dining table (*ibid.*). In combining the traditional, comedic tone of the sitcom narrative of act one with the racialized minstrel performance of act two, Drury confronts spectators with, and implicates them in, the awkward 'pleasurability' of racist representations in these popular genres. At the same time, by infusing the Frasier family's contemporary sitcomsque narrative with elements of minstrelsy, *Fairview's* counter-discursive metatheater points at the continuation of racist discourses in earlier and more recent entertainment genres.

*Fairview's* intermedial references to sitcom and minstrelsy also draw attention to the influence of the media these genres operate in and, similarly to *Venus*, the play raises awareness about the constructedness of the colonial discourses they create. Jimbo's long tirade at the end of act two precisely asserts the influence of the white gaze on race representations in mass medial contexts and further affirms the power of media in creating racial stereotypes:

JIMBO. [...] every other fucking person, or race, or whatever the fuck,  
  
every other thing, they're all rooting against me,  
  
all of them are rooting against me,  
  
and I fucking Know [*sic*] that shit,

I know that

and I love it

I fucking love it

because you know what?

All those motherfuckers are watching my fucking movie.

And rooting for whatever the fuck they want

in my fucking movie.

Like, you want to make me the villain?

That's fine because you're in my fucking movie

motherfucker. (*Fairview* 72)

In his vicious monologue, Jimbo compares himself to the villain in a movie that is structured by the white gaze and does not allow the incorporation of other perspectives. He indicates that he, as a white man, is aware of the privileged position he has in society, and of the harmful influence his position has on the lives of others who are less privileged. Hence his self-claimed status as the 'villain' in the movie which he, as a white man, directs and controls. Jimbo's speech acquires a collective dimension as he uses the deictic expressions 'I' and 'you' in a way that is not directed at an individual but rather addresses the collective experience of white dominance and Black subjugation. Jimbo's speech also acknowledges the fact that the white gaze structures and determines aspects of Black experience because, as he sees it, even Black resistance requires a foil and would be "fucking lost" without it (*Fairview* 73). Jimbo's monologue can be read counter-

discursively because *Fairview*, like *Venus*, explicitly thematizes the influence popular genres have on framing Black bodies.

In act three, Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets, who we have – until then – only heard, join the onstage action and take on the roles of the Black characters about whom the Frasier family has been talking earlier. Moreover, their apparent roleplay goes unnoticed by the actual Frasier family. Jimbo’s, Suze’s, Mack’s, and Bets’s performances are overacted embodiments of their previous stereotypical descriptions of the Black family members; Jimbo’s lawyer Tyrone is a rapper ‘straight outta Compton’ (*Fairview* 84), Mack’s Erika is a man in drag with ‘attitude’ (*Fairview* 86), and Suze’s sassy, jazzy Grandma (*Fairview* 90) obliterates Bets’s traditional ‘Mammy’ impersonation (*Fairview* 93). Hence, in act three, the white characters’ mimicry renders the stereotypical views of Blackness that they previously voiced hypervisible (Frisina 202), intricately linking their comedic overperforming to their earlier racist jokes and cultural appropriation.

Drury’s playtext thus questions mimicking metatheater as an effective device for subverting colonial discourses on the Black body. The play’s critical thrust is also highlighted by daughter Keisha’s intervention in the dramatic action at the end of act three. Keisha, the only member of the Frasier family reacting against the invasion of her dramatic space, feels “just a little out of it” when white Grandmother Suze joins the table (*Fairview* 81) and is visibly shocked when the latter – in a metatheatrical violation of dramatic conventions – can hear the private thoughts she utters in an aside (*Fairview* 82), prompting Keisha to explicitly address the impact that Suze’s white gaze (and, as it is implied, that of the audience) has on her:

KEISHA. I don’t need to sit down.

I need to ask you to leave.



So that I can have some space to think.

I can't think

In the face of you telling me who you think I am

With your loud self and your loud eyes

and your loud guilt–

I can't hear myself think.

[...]

I want to know what that space is.

What that space would be like.

For me.

Without.

Without you–

What should I call you. (*Fairview* 100)

Eventually, Keisha “*steps through the fourth wall*” (*Fairview* 102) and hesitantly invites self-identified white audience members to climb on stage and trade places with her family so that a space can be created where the actions of Black people are not determined by the white gaze (ibid.). The act of physically switching place can be read allegorically as a re-visioning of historically determined ethics of spectating. Nevertheless, the playtext does not suggest that simply reversing the roles of the spectator and the spectated would change stereotypical ways of perceiving

Blackness altogether, since Keisha's final monologue explicitly acknowledges that the white gaze is not easily erased and that she still feels she has to direct her words at "them", i.e., white people, again and again, having no verbal space left "to talk to You", i.e., Black people (*Fairview* 103). Similar to Jimbo's outburst, Keisha tends to move her speech beyond her own (Black) point of view by addressing a collective that includes her, as the playtext's capitalization of "You" and her later reference to "us" (104) indicates.

In the end, Keisha does not provide an authoritative definition of 'the' Black experience but concludes with a self-reflexive comment on the play's title while the stage has become crowded with white audience members: "[...] they found all of it, their view over all of it, the sum of all of it, to be fair" (*Fairview* 106). Keisha's words can be read as exemplifying what Kyle C. Frisina has called *Fairview's* exertion of a "right to opacity" (212). That is, an instruction for (white) spectators not to attempt to imagine any absolute truths of the Black experience (ibid.). Shane Breaux similarly argues that *Fairview's* final theatrical image shows the white spectators that the lights that are now blaring on them do not assist Black people in realizing their actual selves, but only help (white) people see representations of Blackness (85). Building on Frisina's and Breaux's analyses, Keisha's highly cryptic final words can be read as a reference to *Fairview's* failure as a play to resist colonial framings of Black people by using postcolonial metatheatrical devices. Especially the white actors' use of mimicry to perform stereotyped versions of the Black Frasier and Keisha's subsequent interruption of the action attests to this observation. The effectiveness of allegorically switching views or counter-discursively juxtaposing a racist comedic genre with sitcom is also questioned as it remains unclear how exactly these postcolonial strategies might accurately portray the Frasier. What, in the end, is a 'fair view' on Blackness and is there actually an appropriate means of representing Black experiences without first countering white, colonial

frameworks? While Parks's *Venus* uses postcolonial metatheater as a means to resist the colonial gaze, Drury's *Fairview* even goes a step further and questions the ineffectiveness of postcolonial devices to rewrite and replay white framings of the Black body in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to examine how the usage of metatheatrical devices by contemporary experimental African American playwrights has changed the representation of Black bodies on stage by conducting a playtext analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks's 1996 *Venus* and Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2018 *Fairview*. The analysis both combined and applied two methodological approaches. Firstly, Tompkins' theories about metatheater in postcolonial drama (1995) were used to determine in how far counter-discursive, allegorical, and mimicking types of metatheater undermine the power of the white gaze on the framing of the Black body in both plays. Secondly, some of the plays' metatheatrical devices, e.g., the play within the play, were studied from an intermedial viewpoint to scrutinize the evocation of popular (media) genres such as freak show, sitcom, melodrama, and minstrelsy in the two plays.

The analysis confirmed the initial hypothesis that both plays employ postcolonial metatheatrical strategies, albeit with a different dramaturgical effect regarding their ability to adequately resist the white, colonial gaze. Both *Venus* and *Fairview* confirm Tompkins' thesis that since the 1990s counter-discursive strategies increasingly draw on popular texts rather than canonical ones to rewrite colonial discourse. As the plays also appropriate popular performance genres, it may be more accurate to expand the label 'counter-discourse' from written texts to other non-written artefacts and even different (media) genres. This observation is supported by both plays' intermedial references to the framing structures of popular media in an attempt to

allegorically subvert dominant colonial historiography and discourse by means of the spectatorial dimension of theater. Whereas postcolonial metatheatrical strategies in *Venus* mainly resist the white gaze by implicating the audience in the re-enactment of Baartman's historical display, *Fairview* more explicitly questions how far the empowering effect of postcolonial self-reflexive strategies actually reaches. Not only does the title of Drury's playtext refer to this critique, but especially Keisha's intervention to stop the mimicking performances and her plea to switch 'view' indicate the limitations of rewriting colonial history from the colonizer/colonized or, in the American context, the master/slave binary. Since *Fairview* premiered after the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the cross-national and cross-racial resonance it had in supporting Black lives, Drury's interrogation of the postcolonial binary suggests a link between contemporary African American metatheater and American societal developments. Since both *Venus* and *Fairview* are not isolated cases of metatheatrical writing in their playwrights' oeuvres,<sup>10</sup> future research could scrutinize how the findings of this article are representative for Parks's and Drury's oeuvres and, additionally, how they relate to metatheatrical experiments by other up-and-coming African American playwrights such as Jeremy O. Harris or Aleshea Harris to determine if, and in what way, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Black plays are updating earlier forms of representing Blackness onstage.

---

<sup>10</sup> Parks's *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) foreground roleplay and spectacle by both featuring whiteface Abraham Lincoln impersonators, while Drury's *We Are Proud to Present* (2012) links German colonialism to the American context by staging a rehearsal of a play that depicts the historical Herero and Nama genocide.

## Works Cited

- “Are names of groups like African American and Native American ever hyphenated in MLA style?” *MLA Style Center*, 5 June 2018, [style.mla.org/hyphens-names-of-ethnic-groups/](http://style.mla.org/hyphens-names-of-ethnic-groups/). Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2007.
- Billington, Michael. “Fairview review – a daring challenge to the white gaze.” Review of *Fairview*, directed by Nadia Latif. *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2019, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/05/fairview-review-jackie-sibblies-drury-young-vicp](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/05/fairview-review-jackie-sibblies-drury-young-vicp). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- Brantley, Ben. “Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein.” Review of *Venus*, directed by Richard Foreman. *New York Times*, 3 May 1996, [www.nytimes.com/1996/05/03/theater/theater-review-of-an-erotic-freak-show-and-the-lesson-therein.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/03/theater/theater-review-of-an-erotic-freak-show-and-the-lesson-therein.html). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- . “Theater as Sabotage in the Dazzling ‘Fairview.’” Review of *Fairview*, directed by Sarah Benson. *New York Times*. 17 June 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/theater/review-theater-as-sabotage-in-the-dazzling-fairview.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/theater/review-theater-as-sabotage-in-the-dazzling-fairview.html). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- Breaux, Shane. “Seeking a Fairer View: Smashing Theatrical Mirrors in Contemporary Black Drama.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Arts*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2020, pp. 75-87.
- Chemers, Michael M. “Freak show.” *Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/art/freak-show](http://www.britannica.com/art/freak-show). Accessed 7 Oct. 2021.
- Coleman, Nancy. “Why We’re Capitalizing Black.” *New York Times*, 5 July 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html). Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.
- Drury, Jackie Sibblies. *Fairview*. Theatre Communications Group, 2019.
- Drury, Jackie Sibblies, and Nadia Latif. “Fairview: the Pulitzer winner whose creator hopes it has a short shelf life.” Interview by Bridget Minamore. *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2019, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/fairview-jackie-sibblies-drury-nadia-latif](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/fairview-jackie-sibblies-drury-nadia-latif). Accessed 16 Sept. 2021.
- Foster, Verna A. “Meta-Melodrama: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins Appropriates Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 285-305.
- Frisina, Kyle C. “Contemporary African-American Drama at Visuality’s Limits.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2020, pp. 197-220.

- Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Routledge, 1996.
- Kornweibel, Karen Ruth. "A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2009, pp. 64-81.
- Lott, Eric. "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy." *Representations*, vol. 39, 1992, pp. 23-50.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*. Theatre Communications Group, 1997.
- Poole, Ralph J., and Ilka Saal. "Passionate Politics: An Introduction." *Passionate Politics: The Cultural Work of American Melodrama from the Early Republic to the Present*, edited by Ralph J. Poole and Ilka Saal, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, pp. 1-26.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, vol. 6, 2005, pp. 43-64.
- Saal, Ilka. "The Politics of Mimicry: The Minor Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2005, pp. 57-71.
- Strother, Z. S. "Display of the Body Hottentot." *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 1-61.
- Thompson, Katrina Dyonne. *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*. U of Illinois P, 2014.
- Tompkins, Joanne. "'Spectacular Resistance': Metatheatres in Post-Colonial Drama." *Modern Drama*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1995, pp. 42-51.
- Young, Harvey. "Touching History: Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley and the Black Body." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2003, pp. 134-153.
- Young, Jean. "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 699-708.

# The Visual Representation of Power Relationships in the Film Adaptations of William Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

Irina STANOVA and Ann PEETERS

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

## Introduction

In a novel to film adaptation, visual elements, considered “the motion picture’s primary and most powerful means of communication” (Boggs and Petrie 125), play a crucial role in rendering the source text on screen. This article aims to explore the visual representation of power relationships between the protagonists of three film adaptations of William Somerset Maugham’s classical novel *The Painted Veil* (1925), i.e. *The Painted Veil* (1934, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dir. Richard Boleslawski), *The Seventh Sin* (1957, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dir. Ronald Neame and Vincente Minelli [uncredited]), and *The Painted Veil* (2006, Warner Independent Pictures, dir. John Curran).

Films are visual narratives, and this type of narration, impossible for literature, is effectuated through the positioning and movement of the camera, editing, cinematography and mise-en-scène (Lacey 23; Maltby 329). These means, as Richard Maltby notes, help build the story and promote the audience’s involvement (329). The analysis of the different approaches and cinematic techniques used by the three film adaptations to visualize the power relationships between the characters on screen and to highlight the power that the characters emanate at particular moments in the story allows to assess the evolution of the attitudes towards power dynamics in a family context in the decades between the adaptations. It is particularly relevant to

consider this at present as the film adaptations in question demonstrate the changing attitudes towards power balance in a family and the critical reassessment of gender roles.

In *The Painted Veil*,<sup>1</sup> the shy and reserved British bacteriologist Walter Fane brings his somewhat superficial wife Kitty to Hong Kong, where she starts an affair with the Assistant Colonial Secretary, Charlie Townsend. On discovering his wife's infidelity, Walter accepts the post of a doctor in Mei-tan-fu, a cholera-stricken town in inland China, and forces Kitty to accompany him there. However, he agrees to grant an amicable divorce if Townsend signs a promise to divorce his wife and marry Kitty. Confirming Walter's expectations, Townsend is not ready for such a commitment, and Kitty is forced to follow her husband, stepping on the path of self-discovery and moral growth.

The novel *The Painted Veil* and its latest adaptation to date (2006) have been regarded from several perspectives, including colonialism, Orientalism, and feminism. However, the earlier adaptations have been largely disregarded, and scholars have yet to compare all three screen versions of *The Painted Veil*. In addition, the question of power relationships in the novel and the visual aspects of its adaptation(s) has received rather limited scholarly attention. One of the most relevant issues raised in previous research is the signification of both gender and China in the novel (Holden 1994). In Holden's view, the book is determined by disclosure and enclosure; it "seems to focus not upon the truth behind the veil but the veiling itself" (67). In this article, the focus is on the disclosure element and the analysis of what is rendered visible in Kitty and Walter's power dynamics. Agnieszka Kurzawa (2017) regards the relationship of the protagonists of *The Painted Veil* (2006) from the point of view of female and male physical and emotional spaces, with Walter initially excluding his wife from his space and keeping a self-imposed emotional confinement, and

---

<sup>1</sup> All further references are to the 2001 Vintage Classics edition of *The Painted Veil*, which will be abbreviated as PV and inserted parenthetically in the text.



with Kitty transgressing her own metaphorical and literal space through her work at the convent in Mei-tan-fu and spiritual growth. Yitong Pan's analysis (2021) regards the 2006 film adaptation from a visual point of view, exploring positional relationships of the protagonists in several scenes. Pan focuses on the use of haptic visuality in the psychological portrayal of the characters and proves that this type of visuality, by turning psychological aspects into tangible material, gives to the audience a deeper understanding of the protagonists' inner changes.

The present article sets out to analyze general power dynamics in the husband-wife relationship in *The Painted Veil* and its film adaptations, the influence of the context of film production on this specific aspect, and the visual representation of power balance through an in-depth analysis of one scene. It differs from previous studies in connecting gender issues and visual aspects of power dynamics and in offering a graphical representation of power relationships in the analyzed scene. The first part of the present analysis will trace the progression of power dynamics in the husband-wife relationship in *The Painted Veil* adaptations, whereas the second part will focus on a pivotal scene, in which the couple discuss the move to Mei-tan-fu. The scene is remarkable for several reasons: its importance in the narrative, its presence in all the three film adaptations, and the rich material that it provides for the purposes of the present work. By focusing on one scene, precaution has been taken not to disregard its narrative context. The in-depth analysis of the mise-en-scène and blocking in the scene of the protagonists' confrontation reveals the use of various cinematic techniques that emphasize the complex power struggle between the characters, their fluctuating strengths and vulnerabilities and even the scope of their knowledge.

The representation of the couple's power dynamics can be argued to agree with the norms of the classical Hollywood style, to which the analyzed adaptations belong. Classical Hollywood style, according to John Belton, demonstrates "American cinema's proficiency as a narrative

machine” (23) by using various visual means to support the narrative. Moreover, visual elements in films adopting classical Hollywood standards contribute significantly to modelling a specific emotional response from the audience. Richard Maltby, for instance, commenting upon the exploitation of affective qualities of films by the Hollywood film industry, even states that the “generation of audience emotion substitutes for ‘Art’ in Hollywood’s commercial aesthetic” (54-55). Both narrative development and the generation of emotions rely significantly on the visual aspects of a scene.

In classical Hollywood cinema the intended meaning is enhanced visually through various cinematic techniques. Blocking, the actors’ positioning and movements, acquires a narrative function: the physical position of the actors in the frame and the way in which they hold their bodies can provide an extra layer of meaning, clarify the relationship between their characters, and, as Sarah Kozloff points out, contribute to the effect of the dialogue on the viewer (96). In the present work, blocking is considered a primary source of information in the analysis of power relations. In particular, an actor’s standing (as opposed to sitting) position or his/her proximity to the camera can serve to indicate his/her character being in a position of power. Finally, the camera angle can emphasize a character’s authority or subordination. The use of these techniques and their interpretation will be laid out below. The following section focuses specifically on the correlation between the visual representation of power relationships and the historical context of production of the adaptations in question.

### **Film adaptations of *The Painted Veil*: Contexts of Production**

In films, the visual representation of power relationships between male and female characters can offer important insights into the attitudes and beliefs dominating society regarding gender (in)equality in a certain period. The French philosopher Louis Althusser considers that films are

“*active* in creating *particular* representations of reality” (qtd. in Lacey 163; original emphasis). Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery stress that filmmakers are subject to social pressures and norms, and, accordingly, their fictional film characters are given “attitudes, gestures, sentiments, motivations, and appearances that are, in part at least, based on social roles and on general notions about how [a husband, a wife, etc.] is ‘supposed’ to act” (84, 158). Therefore, more recent adaptations can reflect ideological, social and cultural shifts that have occurred since the production of the source text or previous screen versions. Through the analysis, it becomes apparent that the historical contexts of creation had a decisive influence on the representation of power relationships in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil*.

All the three film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* were produced in Hollywood; the first two belong to the classical period of Hollywood cinema that lasted from 1917 to 1960 (as defined by Bordwell et al., qtd. in Lacey 135). *The Painted Veil* (1934) was created during the Great Depression in an oligopolistic Hollywood dominated by eight corporations, of which Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), specialized in upscale adaptations, formed part. A typical criticism of Hollywood films produced between the 1920s and the 1940s treats them as “unrealistic,” containing artificial stories and improbable characters, failing to accurately reflect real-life situations (Jarvie 137), while studios are reprimanded for exploiting successful formulae, teaching the audience what to expect and conditioning it into conformity (Adorno and Horkheimer, qtd. in Hollows and Jancovich 19-20). Although the 1934 adaptation was shot before the reinforcement of the Production Code in 1934, it was released after the Code was adapted. The Code stipulated that adultery must not be explicitly treated or presented attractively, and it prescribed respect for “the sanctity of the institution of marriage” (Lewis 304, 120), to which the adaptation managed to conform despite the subject matter of the source text. Maltby stresses that during the classical

Hollywood era writers, directors, and actors had limited influence on the final product, contrary to the film's producer (139, 155). In the 1930s, actors had exclusive long-term contracts with specific studios, which tried to "fit" the films to their stars, associating a character or genre with them (Allen and Gomery 148, 181). Thus, *The Painted Veil* became a star vehicle for Greta Garbo who signed a contract with MGM in 1925. The film exploits the exoticism of Garbo's accent and confirms her image as tormented and "divinely untouchable" (Earley 250). As Earley puts it, in the 1930s, when a shift to a more realistic depiction of women on the screen took place, and they became "flesh and blood, attainable and real," only Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo retained the aloof "woman-of-mystery" image (248, 250).

The second film adaptation of Maugham's novel, *The Seventh Sin*, was produced in the 1950s, when filmmakers adapted large amounts of commercially popular novels for the purpose of attracting diminishing audiences to the cinema theatres again (Earley 271). Moreover, melodrama thrived as a genre in this period of social turmoil, when although a patriarchal power structure remained dominant, traditional roles were being challenged (Lacey 173). Considering the historical context, it is also noteworthy that in 1952 The Supreme Court of the U.S. overruled the Production Code, which meant that Hollywood could finally include topics that were too risky to address earlier. Similar to *The Painted Veil* (1934), *The Seventh Sin* (1957) was not considered to be realistic from the moment of its release. In a review from the year of its release, for instance, *The New York Times* states that the film "generally seems as remote now as the very setting [in the British colony]" and "remains, slightly unreal, long ago and far away" ("The Seventh Sin Opens [...]", 29 June 1957).

The third and most recent adaptation, finally, was screened 80 years after the novel was published. As Brian McFarlane notes, the time-lapse between the publication of the novel and the

production of the film version influences the way the source text is rendered on screen (137, 187). Indeed, in the decades separating *The Painted Veil* (2006) from the previous adaptations, important ideological and social shifts had taken place. Gender relationships generally developed towards equality, and changes in censorship led to the abandonment of the Production Code and the introduction of the rating system in Hollywood, while, at the same time, the Chinese Film Board introduced censorship for this particular film shot on location in China. In addition, the genre of melodrama was largely rehabilitated, after a period of being viewed as an inferior genre (McFarlane 191), and Hollywood had developed a more realistic style in the years separating the film from the previous adaptations, which significantly influenced the acting style and the representation of the characters. The first two adaptations of *The Painted Veil* were made in a period (1930s to the late 1950s) when women on screen “were to be looked at and to ‘look good’” (Lacey 178), which can be observed in Garbo and Parker’s positioning in the films from 1934 and 1957. In the 2006 film, however, the leading actress Naomi Watts is often shown dishevelled, without or with minimal make-up, rather a “real” woman than a glamorous Hollywood star, the opposite of the images created on the screen by Greta Garbo and Eleanor Parker.

### **Husband vs. Wife Power Relationship in William Somerset Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* and Film Adaptations**

Strong criticism of women’s position in society and a predilection for personal freedom in Maugham’s novel are largely neglected or confronted in the screen versions. As for the husband-wife power relationship in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil*, it needs to be noted that classical Hollywood cinema as an institution supported male dominance and patriarchy, and practiced both fetishization (overvaluation) and devaluation of the woman by transforming her into a spectacle

through lingering close-ups, glamorous costumes, etc., or by representing her as a guilty object (Belton 241). This practice is prominent in *The Painted Veil* (1934) and *The Seventh Sin* (1957).

Supporting traditional family values, the 1934 film adaptation offers merely one brief reflection on the position of women in contemporary society through Katrin's (Kitty in the novel) curtailed ironic remark, "A good husband is what every girl [needs]" (00:07:42-45). In the 1920s, for the first time in American culture, women's sexual desire became a subject of public discussion, even though it was seen predominantly as a threat to traditional family values and ideals of American masculinity (Maltby 404). The film appears to send a warning to the female audience against following their sexual desires. At the end, Katrin learns to appreciate her hard-working husband's worthy qualities and accepts his limited attention towards her. Thus, Maugham's story of a spiritual quest is transformed into a story of coming to terms with patriarchal inequality and loving submission. The couple's reconciliation at the end of the film suggests that they have reached a certain harmony and power balance in their relationship; however, it also suggests that Katrin, from that moment on, would perform the duties of a loving and devoted wife.

In *The Seventh Sin*, a similarly inferior position of the woman in a married couple is gleaned through Carol's (Kitty in the novel) reflection on loveless marriages and the number of women who try to put the blame on themselves, while the traditional view on a wife's role is voiced by the Reverend Mother: "It's a wife's duty to make her husband happy" (01:20:47-50). Carol's relationship with her husband is contrasted with that of Waddington, a British official in Mei-tan-fu, and his Chinese wife, whose devotion to her husband, according to Waddington himself, "is impossible for a Western woman to understand" (01:14:03-08). This comment traces a difference between Occidental and Oriental visions of power distribution in a couple and labels the

“emancipated” Occidental one as “unhappy” (based on Carol’s example) and the “devoted” Oriental one as “happy.”

In the 2006 adaptation of *The Painted Veil*, finally, women’s position in society has clearly albeit subtly changed. Kitty’s protest that “the very idea that a woman should marry regardless of her own feelings is simply prehistoric” (00:06:26-34) is met with a reproach of her being a financial burden for her parents. In compliance with the shift in societal attitudes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, duty is viewed in the film from a different perspective. Kitty’s claim that her duty is to stay with her husband is contrasted with Mother Superior’s reply that “duty is only washing your hands when they are dirty” (01:48:14-17). However, this adaptation, similarly to the 1934 film, ultimately asserts traditional family values, as Kitty eventually transforms into a loving and devoted wife.

In the novel, the husband-wife relationship has three distinct stages in terms of power dynamics, evolving (from Kitty’s perspective) from strong to weak and back to strong again. During the period preceding the proposal and the beginning of marital life, Kitty is clearly the dominant figure who “barely tolerates her husband’s devotion and soon grows exasperated by his deference” (Kuner 77). However, her adultery drastically undermines her position, allowing Walter to impose his decisions against the threat of public scandal and divorce. Kitty slowly regains her power by working in the middle of the epidemic and making decisions on how to build her life after Walter’s death. Talking about Kitty’s sexuality, Holden (72) distinguishes three stages: hiding/closeting (with her lover), external discipline (trip to Mei-tan-fu enforced by Walter) and confession/self-examination. These three stages, ranging from weak to strong, reflect Kitty’s power position in the couple.

In *The Painted Veil* (1934), the first two stages are similar to the novel, evolving from strong to weak. Then, Katrin regains her power status as Walter starts to regret his impulsive

decision and professes his love. *The Seventh Sin*, by contrast, follows the pattern from weak to strong. The film starts with Carol in a weak and doubtful position as her adultery is discovered by her husband; she slowly gains strength as her moral growth unfolds, which culminates with her being shown in the closing scene as a strong and liberated woman. *The Painted Veil* (2006), in turn, closely follows on the novel's three-fold model of power dynamics. Initially, Kitty's position can be described as strong (through the flashbacks to her meeting with Walter two years earlier), but it is then weakened (via adultery and departure for Mei-tan-fu) and again strengthened as evidenced by her moral growth, her work at the convent and her improved relationship with her husband. Whether in line with the model of power dynamics presented in the novel or deviating from it, the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* clearly demonstrate the fluctuation power positions of the female protagonist.

### **Power Relationship in William Somerset Maugham's Novel: A Key Scene Analysis**

With its complex relationship between the protagonists, Maugham's novel and its screen adaptations represent a peculiar case of power relationships and their visual representation on screen. Numerous scholars have discussed the role of visual elements in novel to film adaptations. Some authors contest regarding such adaptations as a mere transfer from words to images; e.g., Kamilla Elliott finds the designation of novels as "words" and films as "images" neither empirically nor logically sustainable (13-14). However, according to a common interpretation, screen adaptations are viewed as intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system to another, in which the source text is recreated in the aural and visual mode (Hutcheon 16, 8). If the latter view is taken into consideration, the recurrent internal focalization in Maugham's novel can be claimed



to challenge the filmmakers with finding a means to “translate” free indirect discourse into cinematic language.

In the novel, with its extradiegetic narrator and focalization shifting between external and internal, the power struggle inside the couple reaches a climax in the discussion concerning Walter’s decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu (PV 48-56). The protagonists’ highly intense opposition is expressed through the construction of the dialogue interspersed with Kitty’s free indirect discourse and her perception of the situation, e.g., “She felt herself go scarlet. Why did he watch her like that? She looked away in embarrassment” (PV 49); “She leaned her forehead on her hand. Suicide. It was nothing short of that. [...] She couldn’t let him do that. It was cruel. It was not her fault if she did not love him” (PV 50). Starting with Kitty’s perplexity as to the purpose of the discussion, the conversation takes a sudden turn as Walter announces his decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu. Chapter 22 finishes with the two lines of dialogue in which Kitty tries to assert herself by resisting Walter’s decision, and in which the opposition of the protagonists reaches climax: “I’m not going, Walter. It’s monstrous to ask me.’ - ‘Then I shall not go either. I shall immediately file my petition [for divorce]’” (PV 51). Chapter 23 starts with Kitty in a perceptibly weaker position: she looks “blankly” at Walter, “falter[s]” as she addresses him, starts to cry, whereas Walter watches her calmly and “without concern” (PV 51-52). Kitty’s anger surges as Walter mentions her lover, and she launches an accusing speech. At this point the power control in the dialogue shifts constantly between Walter and Kitty, as both reveal harboring no illusions about each other. The conversation ends when Walter agrees to grant a divorce under certain conditions, and Kitty “walk[s] with measured step from the room” (PV 56) in order to have an urgent meeting with Townsend. She seemingly wins; however, Walter’s reserved and mocking manner undermines that impression.

Besides the content of their dialogue, in the framework of the present analysis, it is important to consider the interlocutors' physical positions and spatial relationship to each other. As Kitty joins Walter "with a bold face," he asks her to sit down, then sits down himself and starts talking about Mei-tan-fu. The entire conversation takes place while they are seated, which can be gleaned from such references as "[Kitty] sat up now and dried her tears" (PV 52) and "[Walter] leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette" (PV 55). Thus, in the novel the power struggle between the protagonists takes place in a relatively fixed physical position, whereas the shift of power occurs through the dialogue and the manifested attitudes.

It can be claimed that the confrontation between Walter and Kitty goes beyond a personal dispute; it acquires a more general dimension of gender opposition, referring to such issues as the position of a woman in the first quarter of the twentieth century, her restricted choices, limited freedom, the role attributed to her by society, and her 'Otherness' since, as Spivak (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 174) points out, "women in many societies have been relegated to the position of 'Other,' marginalized and in a metaphorical sense, 'colonized'". Kitty's marriage under the pressure of her family's expectations, her fragile situation in case of a public divorce, Walter's clear dominant position in the couple and his greater freedom of decision-making constitute an important background to the scene. Kitty arguably personifies the social changes that British society was undergoing at the time of the publication of the novel, reevaluating the position of women and their freedom of choice.

In her article on feminism and colonial discourses, Chandra Mohanty comments on sexual difference equating female subordination, with power being "automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women)." She warns against such "simplistic formulations" which "reinforce binary divisions between men and women" (207).

The confrontation witnessed in the analyzed scene can be read in the light of this, possibly simplistic, binary opposition between a man and a woman in relation to the power they possess; it can be interpreted from the perspective of clearly defined hierarchy and gender constructs as well. What makes the scene stand out is the restructuring of power dynamics associated with male/female difference and the constant shift of the dualistic positions powerful/powerless, dominating/controlled, superior/inferior. In so doing, the conflict between the protagonists creates a tension between masculinity and femininity. Talking about power becoming “highly sexualized and hierarchically gendered,” Jane Caputi lists violence and control of space as intrinsic components of masculinity (61); she states that power in patriarchal consciousness is understood as the ability to compel obedience and to dominate. What is important in the analyzed scene is that domination identified with masculinity and submission identified with femininity are not stable: they are constantly challenged. The question is whether, and to what extent, this scene in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil* reflects general social changes in the positioning of women and indicates an increasing gender equality.

### **Power Relationship in the Film Adaptations of *The Painted Veil*: Key Scene Analysis**

Through a combination of narration and monstration, films visualize what a literary text can only tell (Stam 35). While a novel stimulates the reader’s imagination through narration, a film presents the story “physicalized” through performance, as screenwriter Michael Lengsfeld puts it. In addition, films tend to offer a more concrete representation of the text: as John McGuire aptly notes, whereas “a written medium [...] allows for some indirection and contemplation, ... the visual aspects of a film demand more literalism” (11). In this article, we propose that certain implicit elements in the literary work can gain strength and emphasis in a film adaptation, and we

consider visual elements as intrinsically supporting the narration and providing additional clues facilitating the interpretation of a scene and of the relationship between the characters.

Even though the adaptations of *The Painted Veil* reshape the source text to a variable degree, the key scene described above is retained in all the three versions. The filmmakers' decisions related to the staging (the arrangement of performance space and the visual details of the performance) influence the audience's interpretation of the scene. Represented graphically, the fluctuation of the characters' positions of power becomes prominent. In tracing possible correspondences between form and function, it can be argued that the characters' physical position, such as standing over someone seated, can indicate a position of power.

While Carolyn Jess-Cooke defines film adaptation exclusively in cinematic terms, as “the process by which a text is visualized on screen” (34), Brian McFarlane specifies that film adaptations offer a combination of perceptual and conceptual experience through verbal and cinematic signs (21, 26-27). Combining images, sounds, words etc., films are multimodal by nature. Indeed, all the cinematic techniques described earlier (blocking, camera angle, etc.) contribute to the construction of the visual image on screen and communicate meaning through various means, including the actors' gestures, facial expressions, costumes, setting, music etc. Even though, in the following, proxemic relationships between the characters on screen are isolated from the other factors, it must be acknowledged that various accompanying elements can potentially intensify or contradict the meaning rendered by the proxemic techniques. In the analyzed adaptations, however, neither strong intensification nor contradiction has been detected, which is why these additional elements can be disregarded. Finally, taking into consideration that, in general, actors' movements and their positions in relation to the camera could be polysemantic and allow for various readings of their power relationships, in the key scene discussed across

adaptations, the meaning of blocking, camera angles etc. has a strong penchant and significantly limits the variety of readings.

In *The Painted Veil* (1934), starring Greta Garbo as Katrin and Herbert Marshall as Walter, in the scene under scrutiny (00:44:08-00:46:18; see a graphical outline of Walter and Katrin's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 1) Walter is shown standing with his cup of coffee while Katrin is sitting in the living room; he is clearly in the dominating position, towering over his wife while sharply announcing that they are going to Mei-tan-fu (Fig. 1, A). As Katrin refuses to accompany him, she stands up and confronts him declaring that she never loved him. At this moment he is sitting in the armchair, and she is in the dominating position, bending over him, professing her love for Townsend (Fig. 1, B). Discarding the depth of Townsend's feelings with contempt, Walter stands up to face Katrin, and being taller than her, makes her look up at him (Fig. 1, C), thus restoring his dominating position and asserting his superior knowledge of Townsend's petty motifs and character.

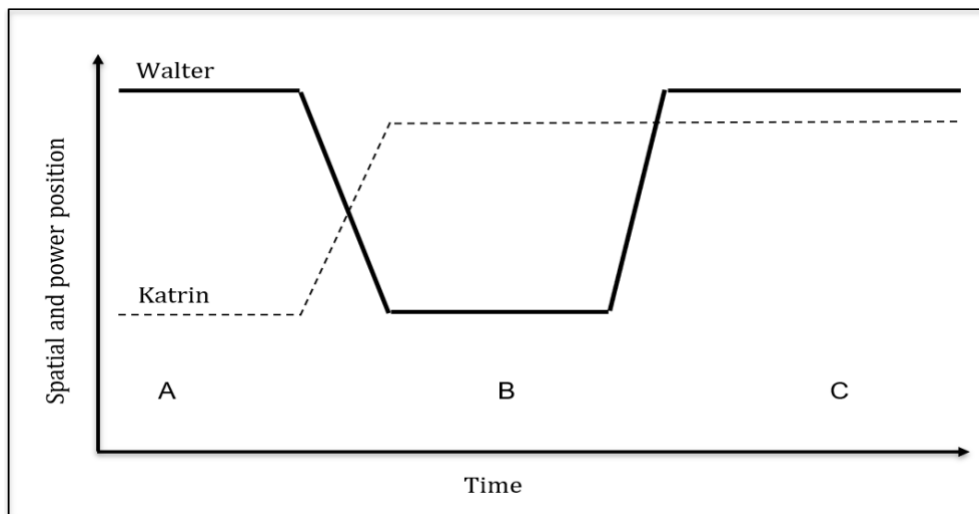


Figure 1. Spatial and power position of Walter and Katrin in the selected scene in *The Painted Veil* (1934)

A completely different approach is used in *The Seventh Sin* (1957), starring Eleanor Parker as Carol and Bill Travers as Walter. When Walter announces his decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu (00:18:09-00:24:20; see a graphical outline of Walter and Carol's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 2), the positioning of the actors indicates a relationship of dominance and subordination between the protagonists: while Carol stays in the background, Walter stands closer to the camera, which emphasizes his height, strength, and authority (Fig. 2, A). As Carol defiantly admits her infidelity and declares to her husband that she despises him, the interlocutors are shown facing each other, which brings them visually to a more equal position (Fig. 2, B). When Walter reveals his understanding of the reasons why Carol married him, the first technique is used again: Carol is shown farther from the camera, subdued by Walter standing in the foreground (Fig. 3, C). The technique of shot reverse shot is then applied as the characters exchange mutual accusations (Fig. 2, D). Finally, when Carol blames Walter for what happened, he taciturnly accepts her accusations as he sits down while she continues to stand, seemingly dominating the relationship now (Fig. 2, E). However, the power suggested by her positioning is taken away from her as Walter openly calls her a fool for believing the authenticity of her lover's feelings. His superior knowledge of human nature and a better understanding of the situation contradicts his seemingly subdued physical position in relation to his wife.

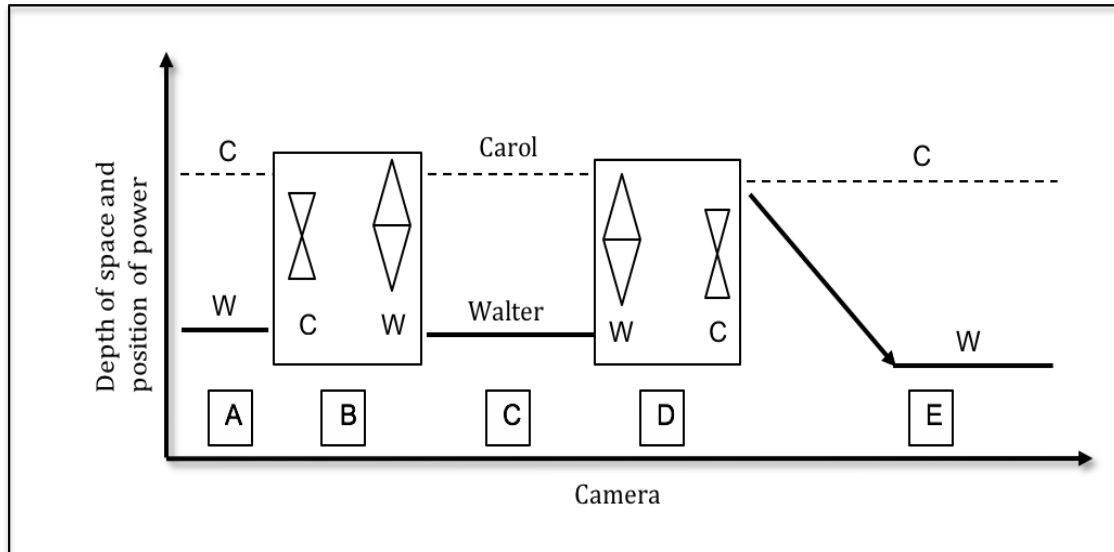


Figure 2. Spatial and power position of Walter and Carol in the selected scene in *The Seventh Sin* (1957)

In *The Painted Veil* (2006), starring Naomi Watts as Kitty and Edward Norton as Walter, two cinematic techniques complement each other with the aim to create a visual representation of the relationship of power: blocking and camera angle. In the scene where Walter plans to announce his decision to take Kitty to Mei-tan-fu (00:24:25-00:29:23; see a graphical outline of Walter and Kitty's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 3), he asks her to sit down (Fig. 3, A); thus, his position of power is emphasized by the composition (he is standing, while Kitty is sitting) and a low angle shot. The latter has the psychological effect of conferring to the subject in focus a strong and powerful look. As Kitty refuses to go to the cholera-stricken town, she stands up (Fig. 3, B), challenging Walter's dominating position, but he physically forces her to sit down (Fig. 3, C), restoring his dominance; finally, she stands up (Fig. 4, D) to tell him that he is partially responsible for her infidelity, challenging both his dominance and self-assurance.

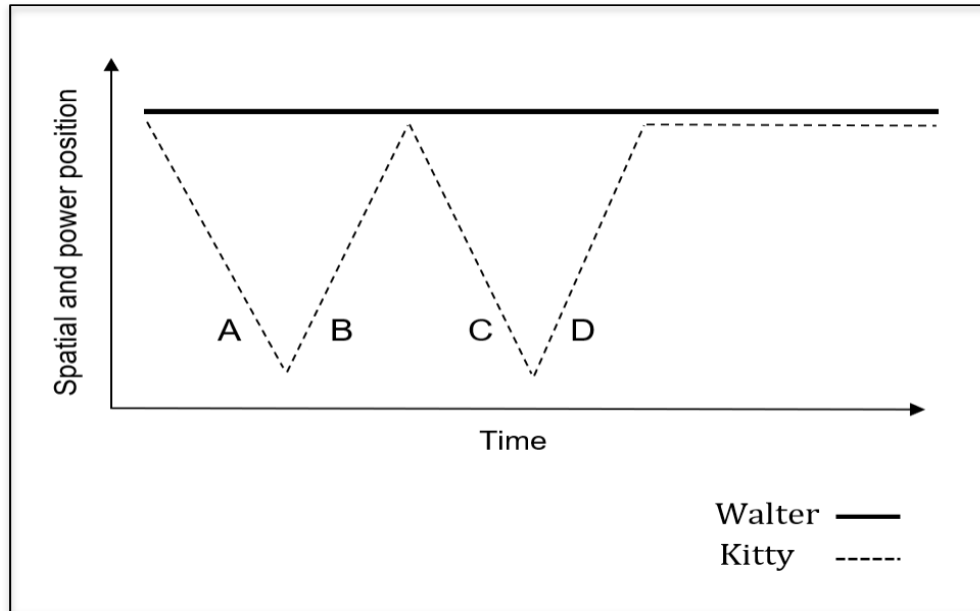


Figure 3. Spatial and power position of Walter and Kitty in the selected scene in *The Painted Veil* (2006)

Regarded from the visual point of view, this scene in the first screen version of *The Painted Veil* demonstrates the predominantly strong and more authoritative position of Walter in relation to his wife, as he both starts and finishes the scene standing and dominating the discussion. The second screen version puts the female protagonist at the background at the beginning of the scene but allows her to finish the scene standing, seemingly dominating the situation and assuming a stronger position in the couple. Finally, in the third screen version, the power positions are defined through multiple channels, and the female protagonist is given a chance to stand up several times to challenge her husband's domination. It can be argued that in the latest version there are indications of the changed views of a woman's position in society in general and in marital relationships in particular.



## **Conclusion**

The analysis above demonstrates how adaptations created in different periods reflect the position of women in society, each from their contemporary perspective, and subtly demonstrate a growing empowerment of the female protagonist. The analysis of a key scene, moreover, has shown how the visualization of the characters' relationships highlights the power struggle in the husband vs. wife relationship and the evolving dynamics and fluctuations of power from the early 1930s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The different cinematic techniques discussed in detail, such as various camera angles, prove to contribute significantly to the depiction of this power struggle.

It can be concluded that the novel and its film adaptations mirror the predominant discourses of their times and depict the characters in accordance with the expectations concerning gender roles. Through the analysis of visual representation of power relationships between specific characters, it has been established that cinematic techniques such as blocking and camera angles help define and intensify the relationship of power between the characters. Moreover, it has been demonstrated how the changing of the actors' positions in the frame reflects the representation of power dynamics between the characters and puts an emphasis on their fleeting moments of empowerment and attenuation.

## Works Cited

- Allen, Robert C., and Douglas Gomery. *Film History: Theory and Practice*. McGraw Hill, 1985.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989.
- Belton, John. *American Cinema/American Culture*. 2nd ed., McGraw Hill, 2005.
- Boggs, Joseph M., and Dennis W. Petrie. *The Art of Watching Films*. Seventh edition, McGraw Hill, 2008.
- Caputi, Jane. "The Pornography of Everyday Life." *Mediated Women. Representations in Popular Culture*, edited by Marian Meyers, Hampton Press, 1999, pp. 57-80.
- Davies, Jude, and Carol R. Smith. *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film*. Keele UP, 1997.
- Earley, Steven C. *An Introduction to American Movies*. New American Library, 1979.
- Elliott, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Holden, Philip. "An Area of Whiteness: The Empty Sign of *The Painted Veil*." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 20, no. 1, March 1994, pp. 61-77. *Project Muse*, doi: 10.1353/esc.1994.0041. Accessed 13 June 2021.
- Hollows, Joanne, and Marc Jancovich. *Approaches to Popular Film*. Manchester UP, 1995.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- Jarvie, I. C. *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology*. The Scarecrow Press, 1978.
- Jess-Cooke, Carolyn. *Shakespeare on Film: Such Things as Dreams Are Made Of*. Wallflower, 2007.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. U of California P, 2000.

- Kuner, M. C. "Maugham and the West." *The World of Somerset Maugham*, edited by Klaus W. Jonas. Peter Owen, 1959, pp. 37-95. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.182521/2015.182521.The-World-Of-Somerset-Maugham\_djvu.txt. Accessed 25 Oct. 2021.
- Kurzawa, Agnieszka. "Transgressing the Spaces in Film Adaptation in W. S. Maugham's *The Painted Veil* [sic]." *Women's Space and Men's Space*. U of Lodz, 2017, pp. 119-23. *Core.ac.uk*, core.ac.uk/download/pdf/159383743.pdf. Accessed 25 Oct. 2021. PDF.
- Lacey, Nick. *Introduction to Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Lengsfield, Michael. "Thoughts on Character." An Introduction to Screenwriting Course, part 2.4. U of East Anglia, *FutureLearn* MOOC platform, 2020. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.
- Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood v. Hard Core*. New York UP, 2000.
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd edition, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Painted Veil*. Vintage Books, 2001.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford UP, 1996.
- McGuire, John Thomas. "Rending the Veils of Illusion: W. Somerset Maugham's 'The Letter' and Its Two Definitive Film Interpretations." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 53, no. 1, Wayne State UP, 2012, pp. 7-21. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41552296. Accessed 24 Oct. 2021.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Longman, 1994, pp. 196-220.
- Pan, Yitong. "From *The Painted Veil* to Its Screen Version: The Changing Journey of Salvation and the Unchanging Spiritual Destination." *Advances in Social Science, Education and*

*Humanities Research*, vol. 559, Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2021), pp. 148-53. PDF.

*The Painted Veil*. Directed by Richard Boleslawski, performances by Greta Garbo and Herbert Marshall. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1934.

*The Painted Veil*. Directed by John Curran, performances by Naomi Watts and Edward Norton. Warner Independent Pictures, 2006.

*The Seventh Sin*. Directed by Ronald Neame, performances by Eleanor Parker and Bill Travers. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1957.

“‘The Seventh Sin’ Opens at the Palace.” Digitised archive, *The New York Times*, 29 June 1957, [www.nytimes.com/1957/06/29/archives/the-seventh-sin-opens-at-the-palace.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1957/06/29/archives/the-seventh-sin-opens-at-the-palace.html). Accessed 30 June 2021.

Stam, Robert. Introduction. *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 1-52.

## **Works Cited**

References: use this style for the reference section

# Literary Spaces and the Aesthetics of Deprivation: Isolation and Textual Artefacts in *Dear Esther* (2012)

Tímea MÉSZÁROS

Universität Bonn

## Introduction

The dominance of narrative elements and a literary approach to the premise are present in several computer game genres, especially adventure and role-playing games based on detailed fictional universes. Walking simulators, a subgenre of adventure games, are unique in the sense that they rely mainly on exploration and environmental storytelling techniques in their gameplay. This paper argues that this recent genre lends itself to literary meaning creation and includes games which combine said exploratory elements with themes and devices adopted from literature. The novelty of literary walking simulators lies in establishing focus on the game text and the observation and interpretation of the fictional world through an absence of characters and a scarcity of typical game mechanics, i.e., a limited opportunity to interact with the environment and a minimalist user interface. In the object of this analysis, *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room), gameplay and character deprivation are also mirrored by the game narrative where vivid memories of absent characters and a lack of contact with the outside world are used extensively to exercise an aesthetic and emotional effect on the player. As the quintessential example of the genre, *Dear Esther*'s handling of the tropes of absence and deprivation has influenced later works such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Annapurna Interactive,) and *All the Delicate Duplicates* (Breeze and Campbell.). Those

who set out to discover these worlds are left alone with the script in an isolated microverse, where text as a medium often appears in a representational form to fill the void left by the departed inhabitants of the game space. In other words, *Dear Esther* has inspired creators through its signification which relies on various forms of omissions, making it a fascinating object from an aesthetic/phenomenological perspective. In what follows, an outline of the walking simulator genre, a brief overview of existing theories of literariness in computer games, as well as the notion of literary games as used here are provided. With this foundation, the subsequent analysis will illustrate how, situated at an intersection of electronic literature and games, these hybrids operate with literary elements which serve as a basis for their multimodal narration. To this end, this work combines a literary approach with a more comprehensive experiential account of the gameplay and its various building blocks including representational and ludic elements with a focus on the aforementioned themes.

### **The essence of games: terminological (re)considerations**

The past decade saw the rise of a genre of exploration-based games that disable nearly all player interactions except for observation, movement, and often reading/listening to narrative. Walking simulators focus attention on the environment through which players can often reconstruct a narrative, making both the temporal and spatial dimension of the story world key elements of their gameplay. Although a tendency to take an even more minimalistic approach to gameplay and do away with the story can be observed in some cases (e.g. *Journey* (Thatgamecompany,); *Proteus* (Twisted Tree,); or *Chionophile* (Tonguç Bodur,)), when present, the story is accentuated through the lack of opponents and fail states, becoming the centre of the experience. The digital narratives

examined here defy classification as belonging to a single medium and are set in worlds with their own intermedial symbolism and intratextual webs of references.

Upon its emergence, the genre prompted researchers in the field of game studies to revisit the question of the role of narrative within the medium. This led to a renewed interest in the ontology of video games, especially the two-fold issue of whether games are defined by their ludic mechanics; and whether the tools of narratology are effective when applied to games (Koenitz 2). The long-standing prescriptivist approach to these questions is based on the view that a strict separation of various media and art forms is necessary for analytical purposes. However, advocates of this theory generally overlook the fact that games inherently defy such artificial categorisation, their experience being defined by intermediality and multimodality. These interrelated terms are applied to games in a complementary sense to account for both their construction and reception. Video games are considered intermedial as they incorporate elements from various sonic, visual, audio-visual, and textual media and art forms (e.g., soundtracks, graphics, cinematics, text inserts). Therefore, player experience is multimodal since it involves a variety of senses: sight, hearing, and (in the case of some controllers and virtual reality games) tactile sensations.

Consequently, “systematic” and especially video game-specific definitions of games often prove inadequate for the purposes of aesthetic analyses (Kirkpatrick 37) or overly restrictive for a phenomenon as varied as games (Parlett qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 71). This is also supported by the results of Salen and Zimmerman’s comparison of definitions of the term “game” by fifteen prominent authors from the fields of philosophy, ludology, and game design. They conclude that, when enumerating key components of (analogue and digital) games, consensus between their outlined conditions only exists regarding the presence of rules (ibid. 79). Therefore, it might be helpful to go back to classic, general definitions of play and games (i.e., the rule-governed form of



play) (ibid. 72), to define an outlier case such as walking simulators which might not fit stricter definitions. Huizinga and Caillois, for example, do not specify a type of activity, mechanic, or even interaction as a prerequisite for gameness and instead look at games as phenomena characterised by their distinctness from everyday life. This at once implies the presence of a fictional element, on which they put direct emphasis (ibid.; Rodriguez). Caillois also establishes a category for games without much agency called “alea,” where relinquishing control and resorting to fate is implied in the rules (Stampfl). Although he focuses mainly on games of chance, this definition is also applicable to walking simulators, where the goals are usually “enforced” and artistic expression is prioritised over player agency (Juul).

Furthermore, Caillois refuses to distinguish between cognitive and kinetic play in his conditions for categorising an activity as a game (Stampfl). Cognitive play is also the cornerstone of classic aesthetic theories postulated by Kant and subsequently Schiller, frequently cited by authors who characterise computer games as works of art (Kirkpatrick and Juul inter alia). According to the two German thinkers, aesthetic enjoyment consists in “free play” i.e., a cooperation between our reasoning and imagination (Kant 61-62; Hein 67). With regard to gaming, the primacy of mental play has been advocated by game designer Will Wright, who found that “the computer is just an incremental step, [...] an intermediate model to the model in the player’s head” (qtd. in Freyermuth et al. 174).

Concerning the role of game narratives, it has been proposed by many scholars that the controversy surrounding their role in games might be resolved by treating them as a phenomenon distinct from print fiction and specific to games (cf. Jenkins Salen and Zimmerman Schell). For Jenkins, this entails viewing game fictions as environments, while Schell describes them as “experiences,” (qtd. in Freyermuth et al. 175). Considering that there is a significant overlap

between these two concepts, for the purposes of this paper, a combination of the two approaches is envisioned to support the phenomenological focus of the analysis. Therefore, this study builds on the assumption that the aesthetic analysis of video games implies the examination of the entire gameplay experience and the game world in a holistic manner rather than consisting of mere narrative biopsy (cf. Kirkpatrick 13; Wei et al. 2), which however does not exclude the possibility of a literary focus. In this way, “emergent” narratives called to life by the player’s actions in more mechanic-heavy genres are not considered superior to “embedded” premises (Jenkins), typical of walking simulators in achieving immersion and eliciting a reaction from the player. Nevertheless, narrative is treated as a “gameplay function,” or a Gibsonian “affordance” (Pinchbeck 4; 6) – one of the various modes games may employ to achieve this objective.

In a generic analysis, Montembeault proposes a topology of typical characteristics that can help define walking simulators as a phenomenon. The study argues that the genre uses combinations of five “modular clusters:” “[1] slow, solitary, and peaceful walking through post-traumatic codified space; [2] search for secrets among ruined places; [3][a] sense of fatalism and spectrality; [4][a] voyeuristic apprehension of everyday life; [5] first-person (dis)embodiment and ambiguous sense of identity” (6). While points 1, 2, and 4 describe the gameplay including the player’s options and behaviours encouraged by the game system, 3 and 5 reflect on the representational side and typical overarching themes. The latter points provide several opportunities for literary expression and for supporting the ludic goal of solving riddles and uncovering secrets: play with language is a tool well-suited to the artistic expression of mystery and ambiguity – making it a possible artistic choice beside audio-visual and procedural means of achieving a similar effect. At the same time, as will be discussed in the section about the nature of literary games, the term “literary walking simulator” delineates an overlap between this genre and

games including literary elements, which predate walking simulators and are present across multiple genres. In their presentation, walking simulators draw inspiration from various media. These sources include the storytelling techniques of modernist cinema (Klamer) as well as post-modern literature – movements which favour fragmentation and emphasise subjective experiences. Furthermore, they borrow gameplay elements from other digital games from the horror, detective, and adventure genres, which also foreground the use of clues, atmospheric spaces and detailed fictional worlds. The following section will reveal how literary expression appears in games at large and why this genre has exceptional potential to accommodate it.

### **Towards a theory of literary walking simulators**

To describe games of a literary nature, this paper draws mainly upon two theories: Espen Aarseth's notion of "cybertexts" and Astrid Ensslin's taxonomy of games as located on a "literary-ludic spectrum." The former refers to all (not just digital) texts, the interpretation of which entails a kinetic and/or cognitive challenge, such as the reconstruction of highly fragmented narratives (Aarseth 1). Literary walking simulators incorporate cognitive play and thus may be regarded as "cybertexts." Like Aarseth, Ensslin also focuses on the presence of literary features in computer games on the level of content rather than form. Excluding adaptations of print literature, she narrows the category down to original, standalone story worlds presented via literary techniques (32). Building on these theories, the concept of literary computer games employed here refers to examples incorporating a rich subtext, wordplay, symbolism, or other devices of indirect signification that are given a crucial role in the narrative, and thus contain multiple layers of meaning on the level of language. Literary games encourage players to strive for a close reading while simultaneously challenging them through a fragmented presentation of the plot and

subjective, unreliable narration. They tend to emphasise the artistic self-expression of the author and often include metafictional/metamedial elements.

This broad definition calls for a number of examples as to how literariness is implemented in game design. A common literary technique in computer games is the inclusion of interior monologues which serve to introduce the player to a given character's thought processes. In *Literary Gaming*, Ensslin analyses Act II of the horror game *The Path* (Tale of Tales), where we get written notes of the playable character's impressions in reaction to the environment as we walk around a forest (146). Similarly, adventure game *Heavy Rain* (Sony) gives the player the option to eavesdrop on the active character's thoughts at any point in time, unfiltered by relevance. Role-playing game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM) uses a dialogue box containing not only interactions between characters but also imagined conversations (sometimes with inanimate objects). What is more, the player also gets clues from the character's intuition and the content of their daydreams. In *Disco Elysium*, these pieces of information are presented using second-person address in a manner resembling 1980s text adventures. In the case of *Dear Esther*, the use of a writing style mimicking the free flow of the narrator's thoughts is combined with another link to literature: metatextual comments regarding the processes of fiction writing (relating to the author) and reading (referencing the experience of the player) alike. Literariness is therefore understood as a feature present in computer games across multiple genres.

Walking simulators often choose a more structured, mediated representation of the character's subjective consciousness. This is realised by means of recollections constituting 'autobiographic' writing, presented in the form of diaries, notes, or personal notebooks (e.g. in *What Remains of Edith Finch*; *Gone Home* (Fullbright); or *All the Delicate Duplicates*), or, in the case of *Dear Esther*, unsent letters. These more elaborate representations of the subject's mental

processes are more likely to employ literary devices such as symbols and motifs than the brief momentary impressions employed in other genres. Simultaneously, these longer passages often retain a fragmented, meandering quality to ensure a realistic representation of mental states such as doubt, confusion and anguish (befitting the “post-traumatic codified space” (Montembeault 6) often encountered in walking simulators). These clues (be they written or recorded) usually cannot be collected or revisited, demanding close and constant attention from the player. In a textual form, they may be depicted in a spatial manner, as overlays in the environment or attached to objects. Moreover, characters’ emotional states are often reflected by the environment in the form of abandoned spaces in a state of disarray (*All the Delicate Duplicates*) or treacherous weather conditions (*What Remains of Edith Finch*; *Life is Strange* (Square Enix)), and in the game’s musical score (*Dear Esther*). Walking simulators are especially suited for literary content because they eliminate the condition of continuous “optimisation” (Juul), thus leaving more room for interpretative play and deep attention to the fictional world. In other words, they address players seeking a focus on story exploration without having to part with the medium-specific experience only digital games can offer — of entering and inhabiting rather than just viewing or reading a story (Calleja qtd. in Engelfeldt-Nielsen et al. 206).

Having established the categories of literary games and walking simulators, the next step towards a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid forms is to define how their combinations work beyond their literary qualities. Literary walking simulators tend to be rather indexical in their conveyance of meaning. By prioritising the use of symbols and other semiotic devices in their representation (audio-visual and textual alike), creators often make the artistic choice to go back to the traditions of signification in games preceding the “hyperrealistic turn” (Freyermuth et al. 90) of the 1990s. This shift marked the beginning of a trend in game design to rely on more explicit

and realistic means of visual representation utilising semi-realistic and later photorealistic graphics.

As mentioned, literary walking simulators challenge the mental faculties of the player and scarcely require sophisticated motor skills. Accordingly, interaction in these instances is to be understood as a mental pursuit, where play happens on a cognitive level and involves the processes of aesthetic perception and interpretation. The conflict is between game and player and results from the game fiction itself: withholding information and giving cryptic or false clues serves to make the goal (typically the uncovering of secrets to reconstruct a narrative) more challenging. While the outcome is most often fixed, the intrinsic ambiguity of the story allows for multiple different conclusions.

In what follows, the spatial and temporal dimensions of *Dear Esther*'s game narrative will be examined and characterised as inseparable elements of an entity which might be considered the game's internal "chronotopos" (Bakhtin). The simple mechanic of moving forward in walking simulators is an integral part of reconstructing past events, which is frequently the main goal in the literary subtype. According to Carbo-Mascarell, this connection of walking as an aesthetic practice with free association and cognitive play has been present in both literature and philosophy since romanticism (1). Her assessment of walking simulators was also the first to employ Bachelard's theory of "topoanalysis, [...] the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (Bachelard 8), to video games – an approach which also informed this paper. With regard to temporality, Bergson's thoughts on hallucinatory states and their relation to the present (Ansell-Pearson) as well as to absence and presence in a phenomenological sense (see also Sokolowski) will be invoked in the following analysis. That walking as a mechanism is suitable for storytelling purposes becomes evident from de Certeau's observation: "In Greek, narration is

called ‘diagesis:’ it establishes an itinerary (it guides) and it passes through (it ‘transgresses’)” (qtd. in Manovich 3). This combination of guided tours of spaces and stories lies at the core of the genre.

### ***Dear Esther: an introduction***

*Dear Esther* grew out of a research project on game narratives at the University of Portsmouth. Alongside its creation, writer and lead developer Dan Pinchbeck analysed a substantial corpus of first-person shooters (FPS) in his dissertation to prove the hypothesis that story was an aspect of gameplay which enabled creators to deliver a “complex experience” despite the simplicity of the game’s infrastructure (Pinchbeck 5). Set in a semi-fictional location in the Hebrides, the game follows the path of a wanderer who arrives to an abandoned island after losing his beloved in a car crash supposedly caused by a drunk driver named Paul. During this last pilgrimage, he writes letters to the titular Esther, the fragments of which can be found scattered about the island in the form of audio recordings, complete with subtitles displaying entire paragraphs to help players follow the flow of the narrator’s thoughts. The content of the passages does not always match a conventional letter format, instead, the narrator abruptly switches between a factual account of the journey, flashbacks and memories, and his subjective perceptions in a manner akin to stream-of-consciousness narration. Whether the player assumes the perspective of the narrator or merely follows in his footsteps, along with the question of whether the island is real or exists only in the imagination of the letters’ author, remains ambiguous throughout the game. The passages contain intratextual references to a fictional book written by an explorer named Donnelly who had charted the island in the 1800s, a reading the narrator uses as a guide through the location. The characters mentioned in the letters include Esther, Paul, Donnelly, and two of the island’s late inhabitants he

describes in his *historical* account; the lonesome shepherd Jakobson and a mysterious hermit. In the course of his wanderings, the narrator enters a hallucinatory state as a joint result of an injury he sustains while passing through the island's caves and the anaesthetics he takes, resulting in a perceived amalgamation of these characters' identities with his own. The main curiosity of the game's storytelling is an additional layer of narrative fragmentation achieved through the randomisation of the passages encountered by the player. At various trigger points, only one of two to four possible excerpts is read out, making the resulting interpretation slightly different upon each playthrough. Only at a limited number of locations is the player supplied the same snippet each time – these passages usually contain key information about character identities or the game's premise. *Dear Esther* has been subjected to multiple gameplay-based close readings (e.g. Carbo-Mascarell; O'Sullivan) and analyses of prominent themes such as its rich biblical references (Milton; Fabius), the island as a body (Nicolle), and the blurring of character identities (Colthup). Besides a shift in thematic focus, a novel feature of the present analysis is its use of the full script.<sup>1</sup> While focusing on the game narrative, the aesthetic/experiential approach used here also takes into consideration the intermediality and multimodality characteristic of video game representation. This is achieved by studying the themes of ellipsis, absence (and implied presence) on an audio-visual as well as textual level and the way they affect the player's perception of the temporal and spatial aspects of the game world and the story.

### **A synthesis of presence and absence in the game world**

---

<sup>1</sup> In the case of *Dear Esther*, quotes from the script are referred to according to their respective trigger points as named in Pinchbeck's notes (2013) rather than by chapter title for added accuracy.



Owing to the setting, the characters appear for the player only through the narrator's recollections. In *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Sokolowski calls this an "empty intention" where the object of our perception is not physically present (33). Most prominently, despite being out of the narrator's reach, Esther remains the central character of the underlying narrative, sewn into the fabric of the game on all levels of representation. The narrator uses the island as a "time capsule" (secondbeach a) to immortalise Esther's story in artistic ways: the walls of the caves are covered in fluorescent paintings which symbolise his trauma, and biblical quotes which play on a parallel between the crash and the story of Paul's conversion (the connection being the motif of the sight of a bright light). In resorting to these devices, he invokes the ancient literary trope of assuring the proliferation of a person through the power of stories and artworks. On the shore we find the letters themselves, folded into paper boats in a symbolic gesture of acquiescence – messengers doomed by their forlorn sender to float idly along the shore and sink without ever fulfilling their purpose (lostbeach). This location serves as the scene of the most cathartic moments of the player's experience, where the effect of this discovery (i.e., the revealing of the origin of the snippets) is amplified by the symbolic development of the depicted emotions. The narrator's gradual acceptance of the events of the past can be seen as an implied meta-ludic comment on the players' assumed agreement to relinquish control and follow a predefined path throughout their traversal.



Fig. 1. The narrator's letters folded into paper boats in *Dear Esther* chapter "The Beacon," PC, The Chinese Room, 2012. Retrieved: 5 April 2021.

As we might notice at an early stage of the journey, the endless waters surrounding the island are uninhabited apart from the paper boats and the wreck of a ship. However, the recordings reference the lights of ships on the horizon "[fugueing] into ambiguity" (firstbeach a), a feature which does not appear on a visual level. O'Sullivan associates this element of absence with the sublime (317), yet the notion is also used by phenomenology to refer to the effect of such ellipses on our perception. Thus, the significance of the game text is emphasised as the most exhaustive source of subjective impressions, while the illustrations and the environment merely complement these. Were the player to find a different passage while walking this beach, the "fugue" of the ships describing the narrator's mental state (northpath b) would not be a part of their experience. With each passage we encounter, we are also reminded of the absence of other possible clues implied in their presence. Since an element of choice is not present, much like in some hypertext works with randomised passages such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, the takeaway from our traversal

is always determined by chance. In this story-within-a-story, the linearity of the route (the “straight line to the summit” (lowervalley 02 c)) appears to be in a paradoxical relationship with this form of narrative fragmentation. In a metatextual note, players are subtly instructed to return repeatedly to overcome this interpretative challenge (jetty a), a requirement which makes the game “a museum shut to all but the most devoted” (hermit d). The resulting circularity in the gameplay experience makes Pias’ theory of the player’s *déjà vu* induced by the pre-established routes characteristic of video game spaces (91) apply in a literal sense, as we “[lose] control of how many visits [we] have made,” (jetty c) much like the narrator before us.

The encouragement to walk these paths repeatedly is contradicted by another assessment of the letters, where the narrator refers to them as a deterrent for those “bound to follow” (valleyreturn d):

When someone had died or was dying or was so ill they gave up what little hope they could sacrifice, they cut parallel lines into the cliff, exposing the white chalk beneath. With the right eyes you could see them from the mainland or the fishing boats and know to send aid or impose a cordon of protection, and wait a generation until whatever pestilence stalked the cliff paths died along with its hosts. *My lines* are just for this: to keep any would-be rescuers at bay. (whitelines, my emphasis)

By comparing his “lines” to those carved into the stones, he presents the player with one of the first links between the text and the environment, which becomes a characteristic narrative device later. The “uneasy permanence” (valleyreturn a) of the island’s abandoned buildings, for example, symbolises the omnipresence of the story within the game world.

While the writer often refers to the game as a “ghost story” (cf. Pinchbeck 51; Pinchbeck qtd. in Biessener), the ghosts we might notice on the periphery of our field of vision are indexical references that symbolise the events of the past seeping into the game’s present as the increasing delirium of the narrator spreads to the playable character. Kirkpatrick characterises games as

aesthetic objects where meaning creation and mechanics rely equally on “allegories” about death (162). In most computer games, this link is manifest in the ubiquitous role of fail states, respawning, and the resulting need to replay certain sequences in order to make progress. This recourse from the nether realm, which he regards as a mere “appearing to appear” (188), is referenced directly in *Dear Esther* through the elusive entities of the ghosts, an aesthetic technique where characters previously only referenced by the game text are visualised in a liminal state between absence and presence. The telling line by *Esther*’s narrator towards the ending, “goodbye to the phenomenal, goodbye to the tangible” (ascent1 a) emphasises the importance of this sense of liminality in the game’s representation both in terms of aesthetics and signification.

### **Spatio-temporal storytelling techniques**

The game space in *Dear Esther* resembles environments known from first-person shooters<sup>2</sup> and might give the player the deceptive impression of an open world at a first glance. However, it is soon revealed the confines of the virtual world are determined by the trigger points marking the audio recordings of passages from the letters, creating a connection between the story space, the past events described in the letters, and the direction in which the player is ushered by the game. Beyond the simple navigability of the path, we must resort to a minimal form of guidance in the light of the radio mast which dominates the landscape and the implied entity of the narrator who is in a pars-pro-toto relationship with the game world and an intermediary of its creators. The island is established as a literary space already in the first chapter through the narrator’s rhetorical question about the shepherds that had once inhabited the area: “I wonder, did they *assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses*, marking the geography with a *superimposed significance*; that

---

<sup>2</sup> The first version of the game was a modification of the shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004).

they could actually *walk the bible and inhabit its contradictions?*” (valleytop a, my emphasis). In this sentence, the text and the virtual environment are juxtaposed in two ways: the poetic significance of certain locations is combined with the inhabitability (cf. de Certeau’s reception theory)<sup>3</sup> and the “contradictory” nature of the biblical parallel embedded in the game’s narrative. The passage refers indirectly to the narrator’s objectives in devising the reader’s experience when writing the letters, and at once to the central idea of the game, the inseparability of the story and the act of traversal.

Before we learn about the exact destination, we are led to believe that we are following the traces of this missing, ephemeral guide. This is most apparent when entering the caves: towards the exit, we find freshly lit candles although the environment at large would suggest that the island has been uninhabited for an extended period of time. In his comments disguised as a monologue, the narrator points out these (valleyreturn d) and other objects (emergence c) which qualify as sources of “richly interpretable information” (Biederman and Vessel qtd. in Carbo-Mascarell 5) and have the potential to confuse the player’s time perception. His small anachronisms and non-sequiturs seemingly addressed to an “invisible audience” (Pinchbeck) fuse the timeline of the letters with the player’s “here-and-now” (Juul qtd. In Hanson 4) constituting a peculiar sense of time. While play at large implies continually adjusting our expectations as games have the ability to constantly remind us or being outside of everyday reality (Rodriguez), literary walking simulators use stories and language to emphasise that we are outside the realm of computer games in a narrower sense.

---

<sup>3</sup> In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau describes the reading experience as a “play of spaces” where the reader is transported into the narrative space of the literary text (1984: xxi).

One of the game's multiple embedded memorials, an underwater mirage which the player finds on the bottom of a lake within the cave is prefaced by the note that "the whole island is underwater" (river b). The state of being submerged in water is used to hint at dream-like spaces, suggesting that the entire journey is "half-imagined" (toppath a). This impression is underlined when we re-emerge on the opposite side of the map and enter an in-game memorial assembled from mementos of the traumatic accident, supporting the interpretation that the entire location is a mental space and that we might be traversing the narrator's thoughts. This echoes Bachelard's depiction of the psyche as a set of intimate spaces, a concept also embraced by walking simulators set in closed private locations such as family homes (e.g. *Gone Home*, *All the Delicate Duplicates*). The past is evoked in the form of memories contained in these locations, resulting in an intersection of the spatial and temporal dimensions of the game and creating the "virtual time-space continuum" which makes digital games a unique medium. Together with Bergson's idea that hallucinatory states of mind always "consist in the presence [...] of something" (Ansell-Pearson 71), the fine line between the real and the imagined, the present and the absent defines the fictional world of *Dear Esther* and is deeply connected to the game's representation of time and space.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard uses underground structures to describe the "irrational" (18) side of our thought processes. *Dear Esther*'s caves are the site of the narrator's blurred visions, yet we also encounter revelations about the meaning behind some of the earlier, cryptic references he weaves into his recollections. This stage of "collapsing symbols," which Pinchbeck regards as a key element of the game, is directly connected to the caves serving as the location of the third chapter: "you were all the world like a beach to me, laid out for investigation, your *geography* telling one story, but hinting at *the geology* hidden behind the cuts and bruises" (secondbeach c, my emphasis). This passage describes that subtextual information about the snippets we find on

the surface (the “geography”) is revealed underground, within the “geology” of the game, using spatial terms to symbolise levels of meaning in the text.

Beyond this point, unlike the player, the narrator can no longer rely on his travel companion:

Donnelly did not pass through the caves. From here on in, his guidance, unreliable as it is, is gone from me. I understand now that *it is between the two of us*, and whatever *correspondence* can be drawn from the wet rocks. (tunnel c, my emphasis)

This obscure comment may refer to his one-sided “correspondence” with Esther or the remainder of the way *accompanied* only by the player. At the same time, the goal of the game is finally revealed as his last symbolic attempt at establishing contact with society by “transmitting the story of Esther’s death to the world” (Pinchbeck) by jumping to his death from the radio mast. His determination results in a tension which he senses in the atmosphere as “the foliage [becomes] all static, like a radio signal returning from another star” (goatshed a). The futility of his mission and that this “signal” cannot travel beyond the confines of the island, however, are foreshadowed in his description of the stones as “muted and lame” (wreck c). In his notes to the translators, the game writer hints at the parallel between this act of symbolic communicational failure and the effect the script aims to achieve, where confusion, ambiguity and the arbitrary bending of the rules of grammar to imitate faulty radio transmissions are of central importance (Pinchbeck). Moreover, not being able to contact the outside world also references the spatial limits inherent in all games.

The most notable instance of the merging of the timelines of the player and narrator occurs when entering the caves in the third chapter. While the game mostly relies on the player’s perspective and only includes an abysmal number of scripted events, these are usually connected to joint experiences the player “re-enacts” (e.g. a vision induced by the lack of oxygen in an

underground lake). At the trigger point “caves entrance,” the narrator’s recollections of accidentally falling down a shaft and sustaining life-threatening injuries are followed by a cut scene where we witness the fall from a first-person perspective. The importance of this passage is signified by the fact that it is played invariably during every playthrough. The narrator, always removed and absent, fades into the player in a haunting collision where their plains of existence are momentarily unified in space and time. This scene encapsulates *Dear Esther*’s gameplay, demanding complete investment in the story and immersion in the exploratory process.

These allusions to the letters and the book together with the game’s inclusion of a rich symbolism on the level of representation underscore the crucial role of textual forms in the player’s experience. Nevertheless, the potential for a literary symbiosis stems from the multimodal nature of the signification of computer games enabling them to accommodate and uphold nuances of the text by treating it as part and parcel of the virtual world rather than a supplementary element. Literary walking simulators call for a player “with the right eyes” (toppath a): a “seeker” (Bateman) willing to both enter and reconstruct the narrative. In *Dear Esther*, the thematised subtextuality, absence, and ellipses serve as the ontological basis for the action. Ultimately, Iser’s idea of the interpretation of literary works (i.e., the crucial role the reader plays in bringing the text to life) can be applied to literary games since the player is invited to contribute to the creative process (279) resulting in one of the endless variants of the game’s narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Following the heyday of electronic literature, many critics were concerned that “the word would eventually get lost” in the ever-growing repertoire of digital art (O’Sullivan). However, in light of this analysis, we may conclude that 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. To demonstrate this, the literary, aesthetic, and ludic representations of absence, quasi-presence and desolation were examined in *Dear Esther*, a game in the vanguard of its genre. While displaying the generic features of using partially imagined spaces, a traumatic premise, and an air of mystery to exercise their effect on the explorer, the game includes novel strategies for assigning an aesthetic function to the text and making it a central artefact of the story world. Rather than trying to impose the point of view of literary narratology as the only tool for examining narratives, this paper sought to demonstrate the roles of player experience and game text in constructing the literary and aesthetic aspects of *Dear Esther* and similar walking simulators. It has been argued that interactivity is not merely a kinetic feature in games: a possible contribution of literary studies to the discourse of video games is reiterating that games often also function as cognitive interfaces with an interpretive dimension. Possible directions for future research on the topic include the proliferation and advancement of these generic practices in view of upcoming (both artistic and technological) developments within the subgenre.

## Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

*All the Delicate Duplicates*. PC, Breeze and Campbell, 2017.

Ansell-Pearson, Keith. "Bergson on Memory." *Memory. Histories, Theories, Debates*. Eds. Susanna Radstone and Bill Schwarz. Fordham UP, 2010, pp. 61-76.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, 1994.

Bakhtin, Michail M. Formen der Zeit im Roman. Untersuchungen zur historischen Poetik, in: Untersuchungen zur Poetik und Theorie des Romans. Eds. Edwald Kowalski und Michael Wegner. Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1986.

Bateman, Chris. "Empirical Game Aesthetics." *Handbook of Digital Games*. Eds. Harry Agius and Marios C. Angelides. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, pp. 411-443.

Biessener, Adam. "Exclusive Interview with Dear Esther's Dan Pinchbeck." *Game Informer*, 17 Apr. 2011, [www.gameinformer.com/games/dear\\_esther/b/pc/archive/2011/04/17/in-depth-q-amp-a-with-creator-dr-dan-pinchbeck.aspx](http://www.gameinformer.com/games/dear_esther/b/pc/archive/2011/04/17/in-depth-q-amp-a-with-creator-dr-dan-pinchbeck.aspx).

Carbo-Mascarell, Rosa. "Walking Simulators. The Digitalisation of an Aesthetic Practice." DiGRA, 2016, *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper\\_66.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_66.pdf).

*Chionophile*. PC, Tonguç Bodur, 2020.

Colthup, Heidi Ann. "'You Were All the World like a Beach to Me.' The Use of Second Person Address to Create Multiple Storyworlds." *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy* 4 (2018), pp. 121-142.

de Certeau, Michael. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. U of California P, 1984.

*Dear Esther*. PC, Thechineseroom, 2008.

----. PC, *The Chinese Room*, 2012.

*Disco Elysium*. PC, ZA/UM, 2019.

Engelfeldt-Nielsen et al. *Understanding Video Games. The Essential Introduction*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2020.

Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. The MIT Press, 2014.

Fabius, Matt. "The Death of Intellectualism in Dear Esther." *Critical Hit!*, 4 May 2014, [criticalhitanalyses.wordpress.com/2014/05/04/the-death-of-intellectualism-in-dear-esther/](http://criticalhitanalyses.wordpress.com/2014/05/04/the-death-of-intellectualism-in-dear-esther/).

Freyermuth, Gundolf S. et al. *Games, Game Design, Game Studies. An Introduction*. Bielefeld: Trascript, 2015.

*Gone Home*. PC, Fullbright, 2013.

*Half-Life 2*. PC, Valve, 2004.

Hanson, Christopher. *Game Time. Understanding Temporality in Video Games*. Bloomington, IND: Indiana UP, 2018.

*Heavy Rain*. PC, Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010.

Hein, Hilde. "Play As an Aesthetic Concept." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27.1 (1968) pp. 67-71.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process. A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History* 3.2 (1972), pp. 279-299.

Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." *MIT Web*, 2003, <http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html>.

*Journey*. PC, Thatgamecompany, 2012.

Joyce, Michael. *Afternoon, a Story*. Eastgate Systems, 2001.

- Juul, Jesper. "The Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of Video Games: Walking Simulators as Response to the Problem of Optimization." *Jesperjuul.net*, 2018. <https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/aesthetics3/>.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987 [1790].
- Kirkpatrick, Graeme. *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester UP, 2015.
- Klamer, Jonathan. "New Wave Games oder: Was Sie schon Immer über Walking
- Koenitz, Hartmuth. "Narrative in Video Games." Springer Link, 22 Jan. 2018, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9\\_154-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9_154-1).
- Lamerichs, Nicolle. "[Game Theory] The Island in Art Game Dear Esther." *Nicolle Lamerichs*, 20 March 2016, <https://nicollelamerichs.com/2016/03/20/making-sense-of-indie-game-dear-esther/>.
- Life is Strange*. PC, Square Enix, 2015.
- Manovich, Lev. "Navigable Space." *Manovich*, 1998, [http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/021-navigable-space/18\\_article\\_1998.pdf](http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/021-navigable-space/18_article_1998.pdf).
- Milton, Ben. "Damascus and Golgotha." *Ontological Geek*, 21 Aug. 2012, <http://ontologicalgeek.com/damascus-and-golgotha/>.
- Montembeault, Hugo and Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon. "The Walking Simulator's Generic Experiences." *Press Start 5.2* (2019), pp. 1-28.
- O'Sullivan, James. "Electronic Literature's Contemporary Moment. Breeze and Campbell's *All the Delicate Duplicates*." *LA Review of Books*, 7 Nov. 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/electronic-literature-turns-a-new-page-breeze-and-campbells-all-the-delicate-duplicates/>.

----. “‘The Dream of an Island.’ *Dear Esther* and the Digital Sublime.” *Paradoxa* 29 (2017), pp. 311-324.

Pias, Klaus. “Höhlen.” *Computer Spiel Welten*. Doctoral dissertation, Bauhaus University Weimar, 1993, 89-107.

Pinchbeck, Dan. “*Dear Esther*. A Ghost Story Built Using the Source Engine.” *Interactive Storytelling. Proceedings of 1<sup>st</sup> International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. Eds. Ulrike Spierling and Nicolas Szilas. Springer, 2008, pp. 51-54.

----. “Some Old Dear Esther Archive Stuff.” *The Chinese Room*, 6 Sept. 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140711012000/http://thechineseroom.co.uk:80/blog/some-old-dear-esther-archive-stuff/>.

----. *Story as a Function of Gameplay in First Person Shooters and an Analysis of FPS Diegetic Content 1999-2007*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Portsmouth, 2009.

*Proteus*. PC, Twisted Tree, 2013.

Rodriguez, Hector. “The Playful and the Serious. An approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.” *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 6.1 (2006), <http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/rodrigues>.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004.

Schell, Jesse. *The Art of Game Design. A Book of Lenses*. 2nd ed. Boca Raton, FL, New York, and London: CRC Press, 2015.

Simulatoren Wissen Wollten und Antonioni nie zu Fragen Wagten.” *Ffk journal* 4 (2019), pp. 66-84.

Sokolowski, Robert. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge UP, 2000.

Stampfl, Nora. "Roger Caillois (1913-1978). Spiel als Frage der inneren Haltung." *Institut für Ludologie*, 5 January 2016, <https://www.ludologie.de/blog/artikel/news/roger-caillois-1913-1978-spiel-als-frage-der-inneren-haltung/>.

*The Path*. PC, Tale of Tales, 2009.

Wei, Huaxin et al. "Time and Space in Digital Game Storytelling." *International Journal of Computer Games Technology* (2010), pp. 1-23.

*What Remains of Edith Finch*. PC, Annapurna Interactive, 2017.

# “What’s on Your Mind?” - A Literary Dialogue with the Machine-Computer

Alexandra SAEMMER

University of Paris 8

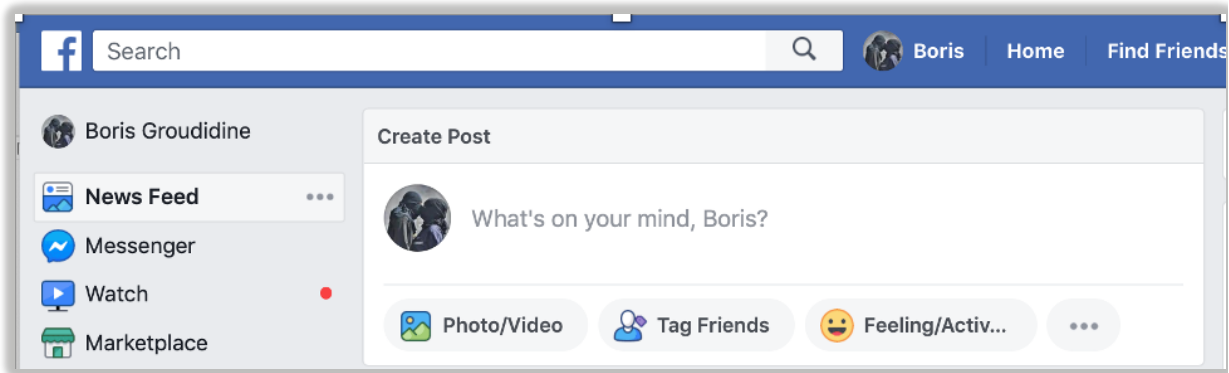


Fig. 1. When English speakers log on to Facebook, they are asked “What’s on your mind?”

When English speakers log on to Facebook, they are asked “What’s on your mind?,” a turn of phrase that prompts a dialogue with the platform, but also raises the issue of the modelling of the mind inside the machine (Fig. 1). All software tools are based on models of human action, desire, perception, and cognition; they anticipate the user’s expectations, engage them in a dialogue based more or less on transparent presumptions. Menus and buttons, for example, are proposals to be creative, but also impose constraints and standards on the content; forms to be filled out are invitations to “express oneself,” but also limit the space for expression, resulting in a way of organising the content that, in part, is not within the remit of the author.

“Architext” is what the French researchers Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuel Souchier called the highly structured writing interface of software tools and platforms (103). The architext imposes constraints on creativity. Nevertheless, a prefabricated device can also result in active appropriation. The poetics of digital literature lie, for me, in the complex and tense dialogue between writers and readers who perceive, interact with and interpret the contents and structures of the visible text on the screen, and its polyphonic programme that makes the voice of the author resonate, as well as the mind models of software designers and manufacturers, and the computer’s “will” that updates the programme.

Recently, the formatting process of the text has taken a new turn which I refer to as “computext.” While architext imposes a form on media content, computext anticipates its very production, and sometimes even writes instead of the author, as if the machine is able to read their mind. Predictive text generators, like Gmail’s “Smart Compose,” use machine-learning processes based on artificial “neural” networks, that predict what the human user is about to write according to probability. For example, when they answer an email, they just have to start their sentences for the system to complete them automatically. The suggestions are calculated by algorithms that detect expressions used regularly by all Gmail users, and by the individual. For example, when they answer an email from a colleague, they just have to start the sentences for the system to complete them automatically (Fig. 2): “Dear Nadège, I hope you a (...re well). Sorry I (... didn’t get back to you sooner). I’ve been really busy (... lately).”



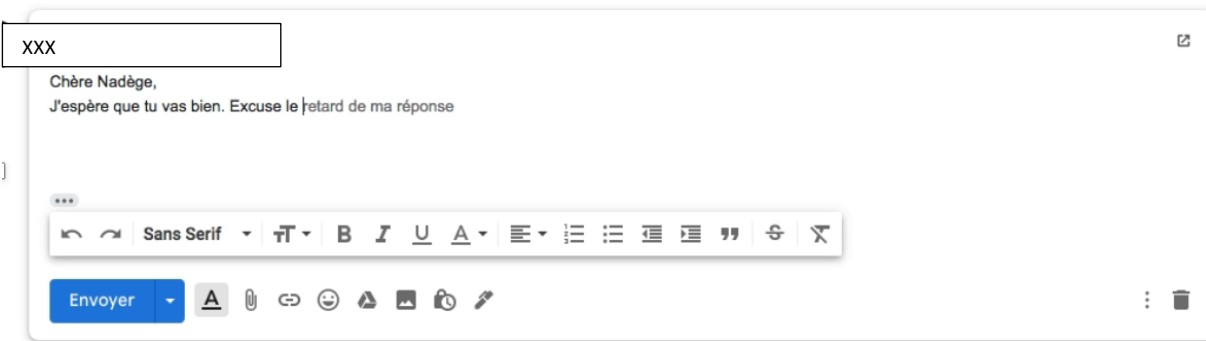


Fig. 2. Gmail's "Smart Compose" predictive text generator.

Engineers at Google confirm that the probability is calculated as soon as the user starts typing an email, but the results are nonetheless limited by the programme as, early on, the company had to deal with racist and sexist comments in the results generated (Chen, Cao et al.). When Gmail writes out what the user may or may not "have in mind," the result reflects a representation of the mind as a network of highly routinised connections between bits of content. Yet it also reflects what Google tries to impose as standards of expression on its community of users. A software tool for writing, editing, and publishing such as Word, PowerPoint, Facebook, Instagram, or Gmail, is not a neutral intermediary. They embody the viewpoints of their owners and engineers, from Steve Jobs to Mark Zuckerberg. The relationship between the "voices" inside the produced text can be disturbing, if not dissonant. From the infancy of net art to today's writings on social networks, these tensions have been reflected by writers who attempt to deconstruct it.

Since the 2000s, my objective as an author and academic in the field of digital literature has been to examine the ambiguous relationship of submission and appropriation, of quenched inspiration, of consensual exploitation and accepted governmentality that structures the dialogue between the human author and the machine-computer. In this article, I will locate the poetics of digital literature in the dialogical process that occurs between the human and the machine, rather

than in the result produced. I will explore this hypothesis through a techno-semiotic analysis of works created by other authors and by myself, relying on a materialist approach that “refuses to cut the interpretation of texts off from the effective conditions of their production and use” (Souchier, Gomez-Mejia et al. 9). The notions of “architext” and “computext” will be central in this discussion.

### ***Don't touch me: a paradoxical dialogue between the recipient and the machine***

*Don't touch me* is a 2003 hypermedia piece by Annie Abrahams which strikingly demonstrates the impact of representations of the mind encoded in software tools on writing and reading practices, and the unequal balance of power between the human actors and the machine that largely exceeds the will of the author. Up until 2020, when a reader launched the piece, a white screen opened with an interactive animation in the bottom right-hand corner, depicting the form of a woman lying on a bed (Fig. 3). As the reader moved the cursor toward the animation, the woman turned around as if the movement had disturbed her. At the same time, a woman's voice started speaking about a childhood memory, in the first person – as long as the reader resisted the temptation to run the cursor over the sleeping woman. If they did so, the narrative went back to the beginning, again and again: the reader's actions were sanctioned by the increasingly insistent demand, written above the image: “ne me touchez pas / don't touch me.”

Since the 2000s, Serge Bouchardon and I have been analysing the poetic tropes behind the form of hypermedia rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Our hypothesis was that the advent of digital literature came with new poetic tropes, such as “animated metaphors” and “interactive metalepses.” Obviously, a metalepsis is, first and foremost, a trope used in novels in print and in the cinema. A metalepsis

---

<sup>1</sup> Bouchardon and Heckman 2012; Saemmer 2011.

occurs when, for example, a character in a novel asks the spectator to get up and shut the door. It suggests, as Jorge Luis Borges tells us, “that if the characters in a narrative can be readers or spectators, then, we, as their readers or spectators, can be fictional characters” (709). I remember the thrill I felt in the 2000s faced with literary hypertexts such as *Zeit für die Bombe* by Susanne Berkenheger,<sup>2</sup> when metalepsis was suddenly no longer just a fake transgression of the barrier between the world of fiction and that of the reader. Unlike characters in a Woody Allen film who address the viewer without the viewer being in a position to really come to their aid, in Abrahams’ piece, the reader can, through a physical act, really have an influence on the way the narrative proceeds.

By orchestrating a dream about the fragile reconstruction of a childhood memory as a dialogue between the human reader and the machine, Abrahams illustrates one of information technology’s founding fantasies: the creation of an autobiographical memory space linked together by associations and processed by the computer thanks to human stimulation. But Abrahams also illustrates the limits of this fantasy of preserving human memory inside the machine, as the compulsive urge to activate the hypermedia prevents the memorial space from working.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Zeit für die Bombe*, one of the first ever pieces of German hyperfiction, was created by Susanne Berkenheger in 1997. At the bottom of one page of *Zeit für die Bombe*, we notice for example a short passage that is both underlined and in red. The graphic command of “drück den kleinen Schalter” (flick the small switch) is a hyperlink. In terms of the narrative, it is addressed to a fictional character. However, the hyperlink leaves the text open to manipulation and invites the reader to also flick the small switch in question (Saemmer 2015).

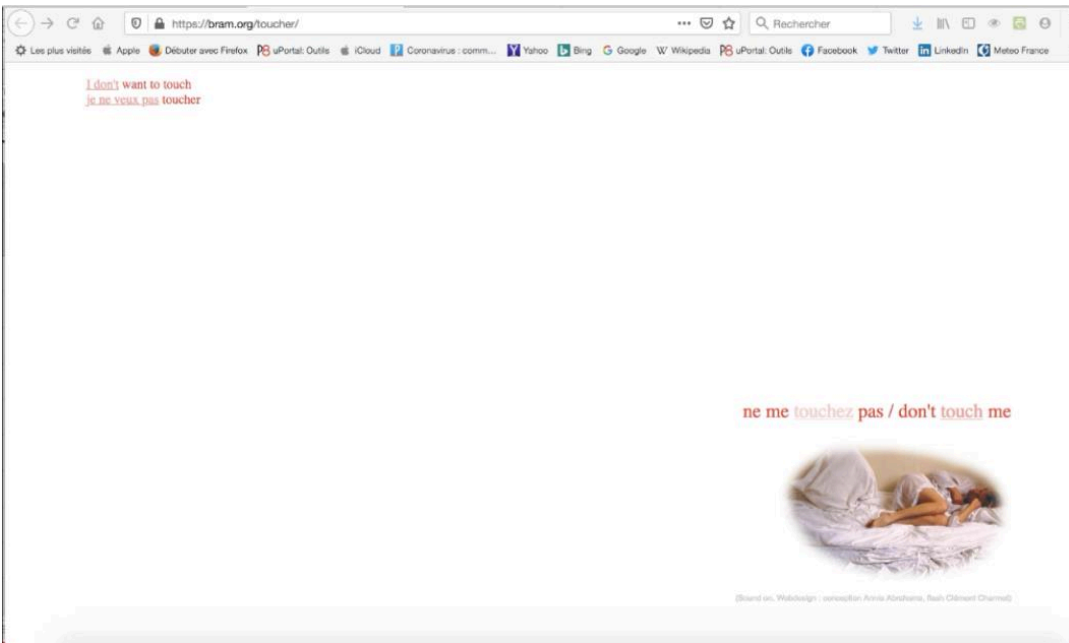


Fig. 3. Annie Abrahams, Don't touch me, 2003.

In 2021, this paradoxical dialogue of seduction and frustration takes a radical turn. If a reader consults the piece on a recent computer, the interface notifies them that there is a “missing module,” and redirects them to the Adobe website (Fig. 4). When *Don't touch me* was originally made, the dialogue between the piece and the machine took place offstage, away from the reader, as Flash player was already installed on most computers. Today, this is no longer the case and, even worse, from 2021 onwards, Adobe no longer updates the player. The childhood memory is not just altered by the eventual impatience of the *reader*, an industrial decision makes it impossible to access this memory.

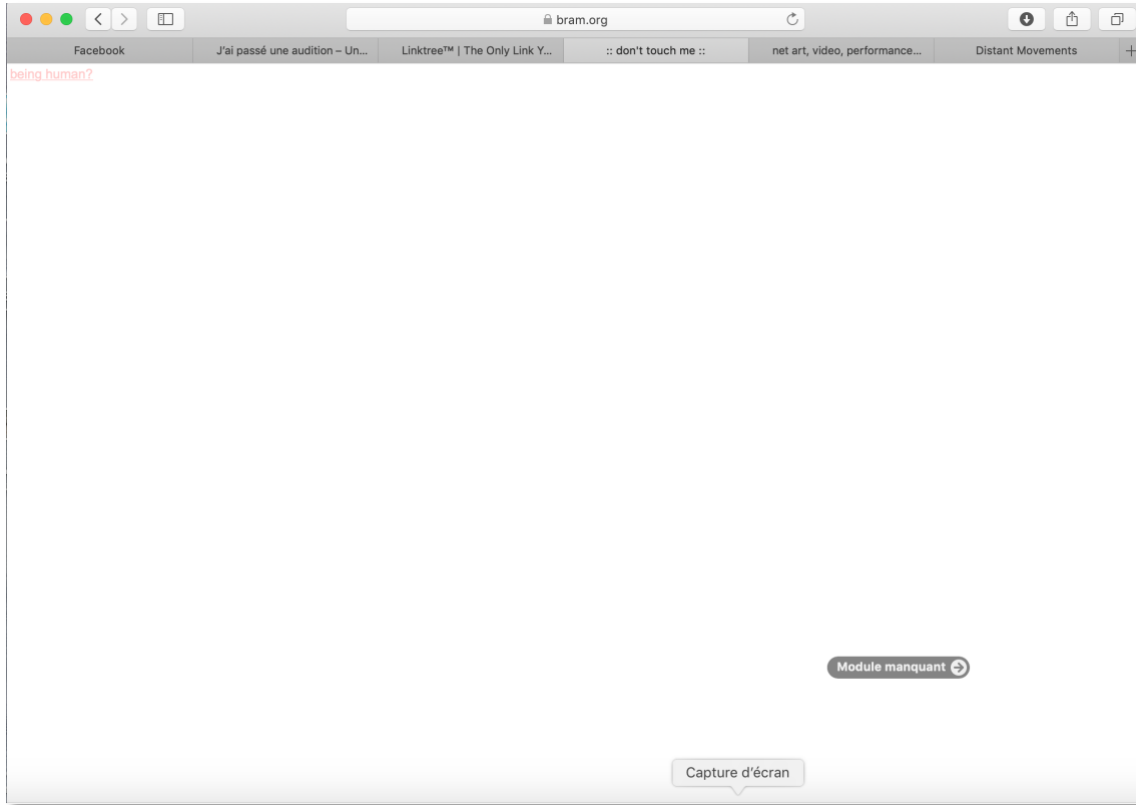


Fig. 4. Screenshot of the opening page of *Don't touch me* in 2021.

I consider the state of the piece at the end of the year 2020, which invites the reader to install the module while already warning them of its obsolescence, to be a version of *Don't touch me* that reveals its techno-semiotic structure; the state where the module launches automatically is no doubt the version that most faithfully reflects the artist's intentions; the 2021 version which prevents the interactive animation from launching, definitively illustrates that all digital pieces are not only performative and fragile, but aesthetically ephemeral (Saemmer). All three versions are valid and make up the poetics of the digital art piece *Don't touch me*: a testimony of the dialogical and performative nature of memorial processes loaded onto a machine, but also a testimony of its fragility and risk of loss.

## **On the procedural, performative, and polyphonic nature of digital art**

Digital art pieces cannot be reduced to their hypermedia content alone. As Philippe Bootz points out, they are *procedural*: their hypermedia structure is executed live, using a programme, on a machine whose characteristics can vary from one computer brand to the next, from one era to another. Furthermore, digital art works are intrinsically *performative*. They unfold in the dialogue between, on the one hand, the piece and the human, and on the other, the piece and the machine. As we have seen with the planned obsolescence of Flash software, this double dialogue does not happen on a level playing field. The French artist Emmanuel Guez affirms that hardware and software forces digital art to march in step with industry, insisting on the inexorable dominance of big IT firms over digital art.

Moreover, all digital art works are *polyphonic*. In order to work on a computer, art works need an operating system that structures the display in advance. The Apple symbol or the Microsoft primary-coloured window logo then become an integral part of the work and, as Gustavo Gomez-Mejia tells us, “for the first time ever in the history of writing, this is evidence of the explicit intrusion of commercial announcers into our daily writing practices” (65).<sup>3</sup>

Apart from requiring hardware, many digital art works are made using software tools. The software tool and its “architext” materialise points of view and values, “an ideology of writing and communication” (Souchier, Candell et al. 160), through the proposals it makes to the user in menus and icons, and through the frames it imposes on a text. In using this “architext,” the author has to deal with recommendations and anticipations regarding what they may (or may not) have on mind: drop-down menus are injunctions to give media content a pre-defined format; forms to be filled

---

<sup>3</sup> Some pieces are of course programmed “by hand” by the artist, without the use of industrial software. Nevertheless, programming languages are not invented from scratch each time a piece is created, instead they follow traditions, they materialise values. The debate caused by the use of “master” and “slave” terminology by Python coding language (Soon, Cox) is an eloquent example of how these programmes can be culturally charged.

out limit the space for expression. Even though the architext is no longer apparent, once the work is published, as is the case in *Don't touch me* by Annie Abrahams where the architext has been incorporated into the piece, and subsequently disappears, the structure of the work crumbles.

### ***Böhmische Dörfer: A literary dialogue with architext***

When the author relies on a software tool or an industrial platform to create a literary work, they invest in a structure that was not created for the task at hand. The tense dialogue with the prefabricated industrial tool and its anticipations regarding the creative process, is an integral part of the work. Nevertheless, a prefabricated device can also result in active appropriation by the author. In the 2000s, Jean-Pierre Balpe experimented with PowerPoint to write his “Cinépoèmes.” Twenty years later, I used presentation software Prezi to script my exploration of a family memory involving the forced migration of the Sudeten people, a German-speaking minority in Czechoslovakia at the end of the Second World War. My grandmother was thrown out of her village, along with her three children and was forced onto one of the death marches that cost the lives of hundreds of Sudeten people. However, as the Sudeten had made a pact with the Nazi regime when Czechoslovakia was annexed by the Third Reich, the story never came up in family conversations. It was only after the Berlin Wall came down that I was able to access some archival material and start to reconstruct this memory, at least partially.

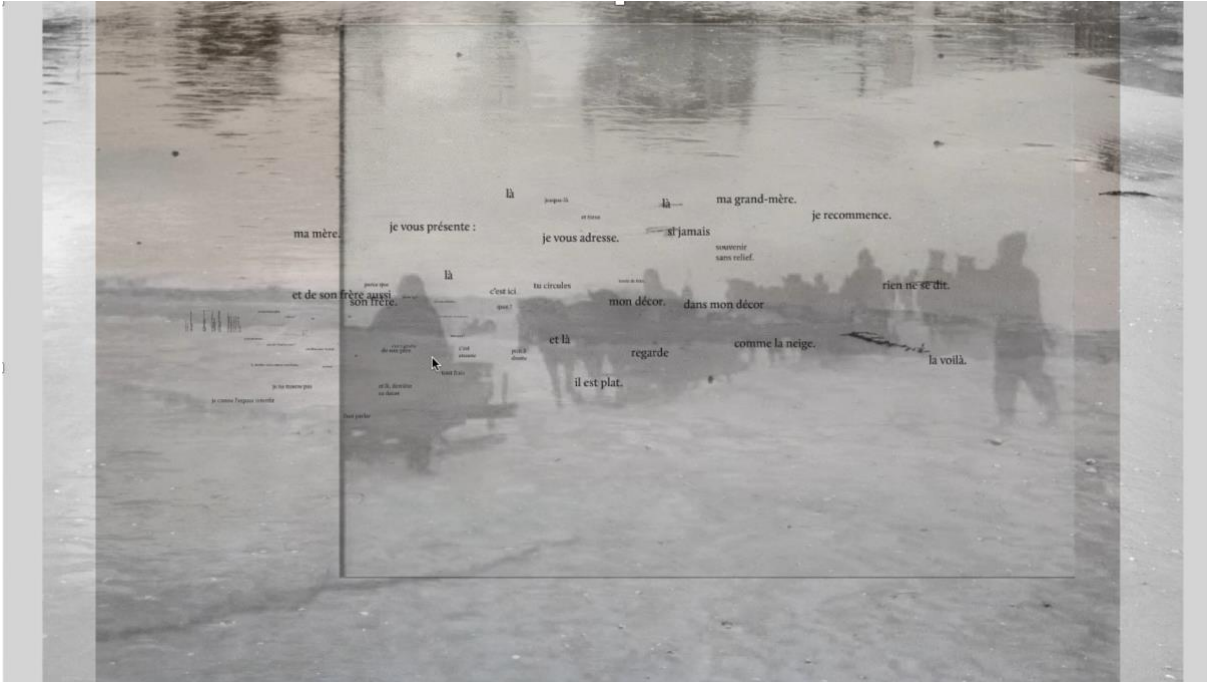


Fig. 5. Open canvas from Alexandra Saemmer, *Böhmische Dörfer*, 2011.

Prezi software does not offer a structured, slide by slide “architext” for a presentation as, for instance, PowerPoint does; instead, it positions all of the visual and written material in one slide, or “open canvas,” and then links the elements by numbered browsing paths. The author can navigate freely through the elements, either chronologically or in a different order during the presentation. The “zoom reveal” function lets the author programme the zooms or unveil details by hand as the presentation unfolds.

I uploaded an archival video to the background of *Böhmische Dörfer*, a rare piece of visual evidence of the Sudeten people’s death marches. I then placed text elements on top of the video (Fig. 5) so that the viewer could watch it clearly by zooming in on the video, but if they tried to concentrate on the written narrative, they would literally lose sight of the video. I made it impossible to consult the image and the text at the same time. The dizziness that I sometimes feel



as a trivial Prezi presentation automatically zooms in and out seemed, to me, to translate the feeling of imbalance that I had as soon as I began to explore these patchy family memories.

I wrote *Böhmische Dörfer* as a conscious dialogue with the industrial software tool Prezi and its anticipations on the functioning of the human mind which allowed me to give the memorial space a form that *seemed* to correspond well. Nevertheless, I also negotiated the process with the tool's questionable suppositions on this functioning. Firstly, the tool represents the functioning of a memory space as a "neuronal" canvas of contents and links – a very simplified translation of the actual processes taking place in the human brain. Secondly, the company states that they also use "neuroscience" in order to make presentations of these spaces "more engaging, persuasive and memorable (Prezi Software Presentation)" for the receiver: the possibility to alternate zooms in and out, to employ smooth transitions, spectacular loops, one-off dives and panoramic overviews in a non-linear way is supposed to help the audience memorize the content. In *Böhmische Dörfer*, the "neural" connections mimed by the tool's navigation however did not allow the rendering of the patchy memory of the expulsion of the Sudeten people in a "memorable" way; quite the opposite. In fact, I used the tool to show that the reconstruction of this memory was impossible, for the author as well as for the reader; the spectacular effects of Prezi only emphasise the absence of a narrative thread of this family memory which is actually lost, because most of the actors are dead, but also because of the unspoken shame and resentments which still weigh on the memory of the Sudeten people.

### **The fictional profile: a literary dialogue with a hidden narrator**

Jean-Pierre Balpe was among the first writers to experiment with industrial software tools in digital literature, and he also initiated in France what I consider to be an emerging full-blown literary

genre, the “fictional profile” on social networks. For a number of years now, Jean-Pierre Balpe has had many identities on Facebook, including Rachel Charlus, Germaine Proust, Antoine Elstir, Maurice Roman et al. He updates Rachel Charlus’ profile daily, having her post automatically generated proverbs, comment on everyday events, as well as share and interact with other profiles, be they fictional or not (Fig. 6).

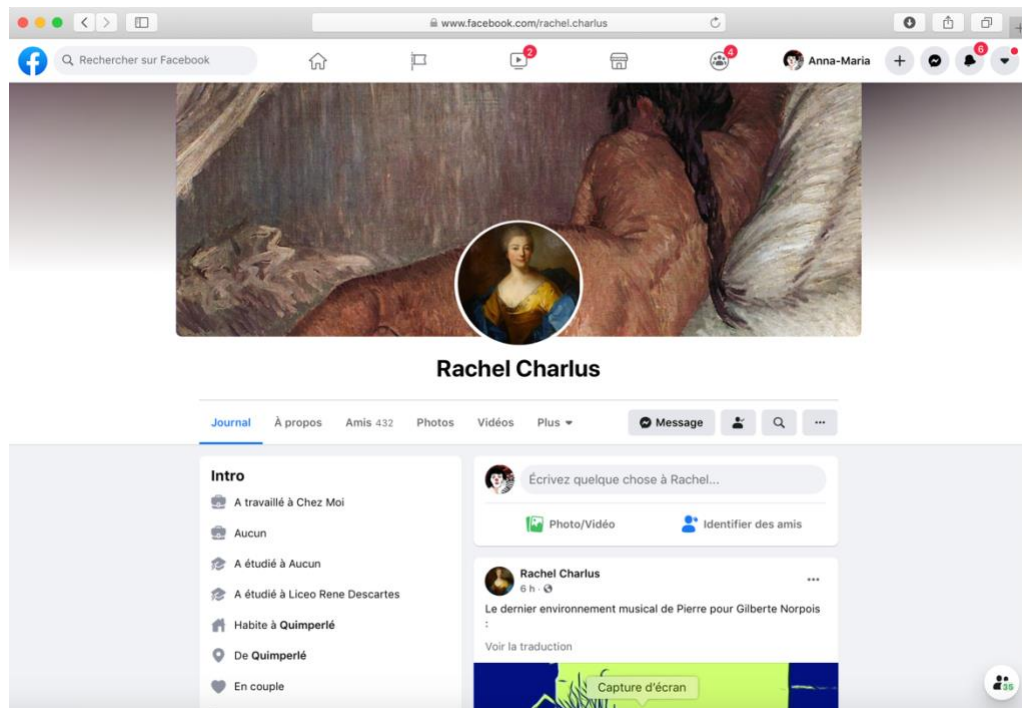


Fig. 6. Jean-Pierre Balpe’s fictional profile “Rachel Charlus” on Facebook.

A fictional profile is a narration that follows the daily flow of social network posts (Saemmer 2021). Of course, Rachel Charlus’ posts could be extracted from the platform and published on paper, but they take on a specific meaning for the reader when surrounded by thousands of diffracted representations of everyday news. The fictional profile tells its story through its very existence on a social network. As narratology theorist Raphaël Baroni (2017) explains, when we are immersed in the fictional story of a printed novel, we are both involved in the world we are reading about while also being locked out of it. With the fictional profile, for the first time in

literary history, the reader can contact a fictional character through a social network and hope to get an answer. Rachel Charlus's maxim, "Virtue can only be found in a cultivated, enlightened soul that is perfected by continuous exercise" elicited a comment from a reader: "I hope this is generated text, as it is not only stupid, it is a dogmatic, elitist monstrosity," only for Rachel Charlus to reply: "Dear Sir, who do you take me for?" (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7. Screenshot of communicative exchange between reader and fictional character on Jean-Pierre Balpe's fictional profile "Rachel Charlus" on Facebook.

When a writer creates a fictional profile on Facebook, they begin by outlining the contours by filling out the "architext" provided by the platform as to the age, gender, place of birth, interests, and friend circle of their character. They then bring their character to "life" by posting on its behalf and reacting to the various interactions of other users. But this is not all. The contours of the fictional profile are not only defined by the identity it openly claims, by what it writes or shares.

The social network also takes into account behaviours such as the time spent looking at a particular image, and cookies harvesting data that are *not* declared as such by the author but are nevertheless used to categorise the profile. The advertisements inserted on the newsfeed of a profile are selected by the company according to the characteristics of this calculated “shadow.” The authority that categorises the shadow profile could be considered to be a sort of narrator inside the tool that knows more about the character than the writer does.

It is possible to access a shadow profile on Facebook using a function that allows users to view and adjust their “ad preferences”(Facebook advertisers). The profile is defined according to centers of interest that are categorised as follows: News, Entertainment, People, Pastimes and Activities, Lifestyle and Culture. Facebook only displays the results of calculations carried out on the data harvested but does not give details as to the level of importance given to each category. However, if we “reverse-engineer” the system by doing a cross study of the shadow profiles of characters with different characteristics, we can throw some light on the blind spots in the process.

*Nouvelles de la Colonie* is a collaborative narrative that I initiated on Facebook in 2018 (Fig. 8) (Saemmer et al). Five profiles wrote a novel of anticipation from day to day, about a world where life no longer existed outside the platform. To be more exact, the characters are all part of an entirely virtual university campus, where even using one’s legs is forbidden. Anna-Maria Wegekruz, Ivan Arcelov, Pavel Karandash, Olga Limitrova and Brice Quarante told the story of this captivity through their profiles, which were themselves captives of Facebook.



Fig. 8. Screenshot of the page of *Nouvelles de la Colonie*, a collaborative narrative on Facebook.

Anna-Maria Wegekrez, my character in *Nouvelles de la Colonie*, is a “fictional profile.” As already mentioned, a fictional profile tells its story through the data it declares in its account details, and through the posts it publishes, shares, comments on or likes under that name. But the story of the fictional profile is also “told” by the platform: its personal posts are mixed with others in the newsfeed, according to a rating system that takes into account subjects of past interest, when the profile commented or liked a friend’s post, or even if they just stopped to look at a given image. Advertising posts are inserted by Facebook according to this behaviour, but also based on cookies and the computer’s geolocation. For example, advertisement for a Gothic-style skull appeared on Anna-Maria Wegekrez’s Facebook page based not on her declared profile, but on her shadow

profile: Anna has never openly expressed an interest in these types of objects, but the platform seems to know what Anna likes, more than the author does.

Among the “centres of interest” that Facebook has deduced for the shadow profile Anna-Maria Wegekruz (Fig. 8), luxury products, jewellery and... Halloween all appear at the top of the list; but it also features the travel website Booking.com even though, in the fictional world of the Colony, all travel is forbidden. Art and literature are on the list, but so are... skulls (*Crâne* in French), an interest I definitely did not attribute to the character. But, I have to admit that I myself have a collection of gothic jewellery!

Let us take a closer look at the algorithmic process in order to understand the deductions made by Facebook about these “unconscious” desires and passions of the character. Dominique Cardon tells us that, in the artificial neural networks used by big companies, the future of the identity of the user is predicted according to the individual user’s behaviours, but also “using the past of those who look like them” (380). Yann Le Cun, an engineer at Facebook, explains how this works: on the one hand, the neural network takes into account the individual’s areas of interest, calculated according to their past interests; however, it is also pulled along by the billions of daily clicks on Facebook from other users. The neural network predicts whether or not the person will click on a given advertisement according to the ponderation between the individual and the group, relying on de-contextualised data that predict future interactions – including those of which it is only vaguely aware. As Dominique Cardon puts it: “Predictive algorithms do not give an answer as to what individuals pretend to want to do, but to what they do without wanting to admit it” (173).



Fig. 9. Screenshot of the declared profile of the fictional character Anna-Maria Wegekrez on Facebook, and the calculated categories of her shadow profile.

Fictional profiles on Facebook are strictly outlined by the company, as the company has a certain idea of its “model” user (Eco): the importance of their openly declared interests and desires, but also their hidden wishes, reflexes, and passions, calculated and anticipated by the “computext.” The techno-semiotic structure of the newsfeed, where profile posts are mixed with commercial contributions selected by the platform, reflect the company’s model of the human user’s conscious and unconscious mind structure, as well as industrial priorities.

However, contrary to the pessimistic pronouncements by dissident software engineers in the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020), the user that corresponds perfectly to the puppet invented by engineers does in fact not exist. Once the author of a fictional profile knows how Facebook creates the declared profile and its shadow, they can use this knowledge: the author may then not only focus on what the fictional profile openly declares, but make sure that the slightest reflexes – momentary stops on an image, geolocation, etc. – do not reflect their personal

preferences, but those of the character. In other words, the author does not only write the character, they literally *embody* its interactions.

### **Instead of concluding**

In software tools and on platforms, the visual formatting of media content and its appearance on the screen are governed by “architext.” The constraints imposed by predefined colours, fonts, frames and menus on writing and editing do not only standardize the form of digital texts; they rationalize it, following models of human expectation, wishes and desires as well as economic and political interests, as demonstrated by the evolution of Abraham’s piece *Don’t touch me* based on Flash software. This formatting process has recently taken a new turn that I referred to as “computext.” While architext imposes a form on media content, computext anticipates its very production, and writes *instead* of the author. In the last few decades, digital literature has invented its own poetics in relation to architext and its constraints in terms of standardization and rationalization. How will these poetics be reinvented in the age of computext? In answer to this question, I again suggest locating the “literariness” of digital writing in the dialogical process that occurs between the human and the machine-computer as opposed to the result produced.

Whereas the proposals by Facebook’s newsfeed or Google’s Smart compose first and foremost may raise fears of new forms of standardization, the results calculated by the *Write with transformer* neural network, an open science tool (Write with transformer web app), give us a taste of the literary potential of this dialogue. The user, first of all, chooses an AI model from a list. By clicking “trigger autocomplete” on the page, options are given for the continuation of each sentence. By setting the “temperature,” the user can opt for a varying degree of conventionality, in other words: they can encourage results that converge with or deviate from the regular responses in the generator’s database, without the pressure to respect any “standards.” If the user has the app



complete a list using first a high level of conventionality, then a low one, it seems for example like the app can decide to no longer follow the standards it detects, and to materialise the idea of a machine-writer that uses the standards freely. Obviously, *Write with transformer*, like any text generator, reveals discursive routines, but the writer can regulate the level of routinisation. Notwithstanding these issues, *Write with transformer* above all begins a lively conversation with the literary library. Each piece of text proposed comes from the books in the tool's database, and these origins continue to resonate in the new text produced as the author selects, rejects or rewrites the proposals. As Tom Lebrun and René Audet state, writing with machine “computext” may be considered as curatorial, and involves finding an individual path through the avalanche of content generated by AI.

On Facebook, the text of a fictional profile is immersed in a mesh of “polyphonic quotes, gloss and reruns” (Candel 125) resulting from a very restrictive and constraint model of the human mind, based on a declared conscious and a calculated subconscious, that give rise to part of its poetics if the writer tries to negotiate with and subvert this model. Using tools like *Write with transformer*, singular texts emerge from this mesh while remaining deeply connected to the algorithmic structure of the tool, and the content of its database. I imagine the future of literary writing with artificial neural networks as an enquiry that digs into the literature of the world as if it were an open database in order to forge a new path.

## Works Cited

- Abrahams, Annie. *Don't touch me*, 2003, <https://www.bram.org/toucher/>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- “Ad Preferences.” *Facebook*, [www.facebook.com/adpreferences/advertisers](http://www.facebook.com/adpreferences/advertisers).
- Balpe, Jean-Pierre. *Cinépoèmes*, <https://www.balpe.name/Neuf-Cinemoemes>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- . “Rachel Charlus,” <https://www.facebook.com/rachel.charlus>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Baroni, Raphaël. *Les rouages de l'intrigue. Les outils de la narratologie postclassique pour l'analyse des textes littéraires*, Slatkine Erudition, 2017.
- Bootz, Philippe. “Oeuvres procedurales.” Lecture at Groupe d'études “Eesthétique des arts informatiques,” Genève, mars 9, 1999, <https://infolipo.org/rencontres/rc1998/9mar99.html>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Gallimard, 1993.
- Bouchardon, Serge and Heckman Davin. “Digital Manipulability and Digital Literature.” *Electronic Book Review*, 2012, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/heuristic>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Bouchardon, Serge. “Towards Gestural Specificity in Digital Literature.” *Electronic Book Review*, 2018, <http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/towards-gestural-specificity-in-digital-literature/>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Calvino, Italo. *La Machine Littérature*, Seuil, 1984.
- Chen, Mia Xu, Cao Yuan, Tsay Jackie et al. “Gmail Smart Compose: Real-Time Assisted Writing.” KDD '19: Proceedings of the 25th ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge

- Discovery & Data Mining, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3292500.3330723>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Eco, Umberto. *Lector in fabula*, LGF-Livre de poche, 1985.
- Gomez-Mejia, Gustavo. *Les fabriques de soi? Identité et Industrie sur le web*, MkF, 2016.
- Guez, Emmanuel. “Art numérique, émancipation, créativité.” Lecture at the seminar “Pour une éducation critique aux médias en contexte numérique,” University Paris 8, April 15, 2016.
- Hugging Face. *Write With Transformer*, [transformer.huggingface.co](https://transformer.huggingface.co).
- Jeanneret, Yves and Souchier Emmanuel. “Pour une poétique de l’écrit d’écran.” *Xoana* no. 6, 1999, pp. 97-107.
- Lebrun, Tom and Audet René. *Artificial Intelligence and the Book Industry*, White paper, Laboratoire Ex situ, Université Laval, September 2020, [https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/bitstream/20.500.11794/66610/4/LivreBlanc\\_IA\\_MoneduLivre\\_ANG.pdf](https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/bitstream/20.500.11794/66610/4/LivreBlanc_IA_MoneduLivre_ANG.pdf). Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Lebrun, Tom. “Pour une typologie des œuvres littéraires générées par intelligence artificielle.” *Balisages*, 2020, <https://publications-prairial.fr/balisages/index.php?id=304>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Le Cun, Yann. *Quand la machine apprend*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2019.
- Orlowski, Jeff. *The Social Dilemma*, Netflix, 2020.
- Prezi. “The Science of Effective Presentations | Prezi.” *Prezi.Com*, [prezi.com/the-science](https://prezi.com/the-science).
- Saemmer, Alexandra. “Animation and manipulation figures in digital literature.” *LLC/Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vol. 28, no 2, 2011, Oxford University Press, pp. 321-330.
- . “De l’(im-)possibilité d’écrire un roman sur Facebook.” *Romanesques*, no 13, Classiques Garnier, 2021, pp. 185-204.

- . “De la confirmation à la subversion: Les figures d’animation face aux conventions du discours numérique.” *Protée*, no 39, vol. 1, 2011, pp. 23-36.
- . “From the architext to the computext. Poetics of the digital text, facing the evolution of devices.” *Communication & langages*, vol. 203, no 1, 2020, pp. 99-114.
- . “*Nouvelles de la Colonie* – un jeu de rôle littéraire sur Facebook.” *Formules*, no 22, 2021, pp. 283-310, <https://www.facebook.com/NouvellesDeLaColonie/>.
- , *Rhétorique du texte numérique*, Presses de l’ENSSIB, 2015.
- . “Welcome to the Facebook colony.” *HYBRID (Revue des arts et médiations humaines)*, no 7, 2021, <https://hybrid.univ-paris8.fr/lodel/index.php?id=1504>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- . “Writing the ephemeral (...) and re-enchanting the remnants: The lability of the digital device in literary practice.” *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 2011, pp. 79- 92.
- Soon, Winnie and Cox Geoff. *Aesthetic programming. A handbook of software studies*, Open Humanities Press, 2020.
- Souchier, Emmanuel, et al. *Le Numérique comme écriture. Théories et méthodes d’analyse*, Armand Colin, 2019.

**Intimacy *betweenspace/s*:**

**Towards a Transmedial Practice of Digital Intimacy**

Camille INTSON

University of Toronto

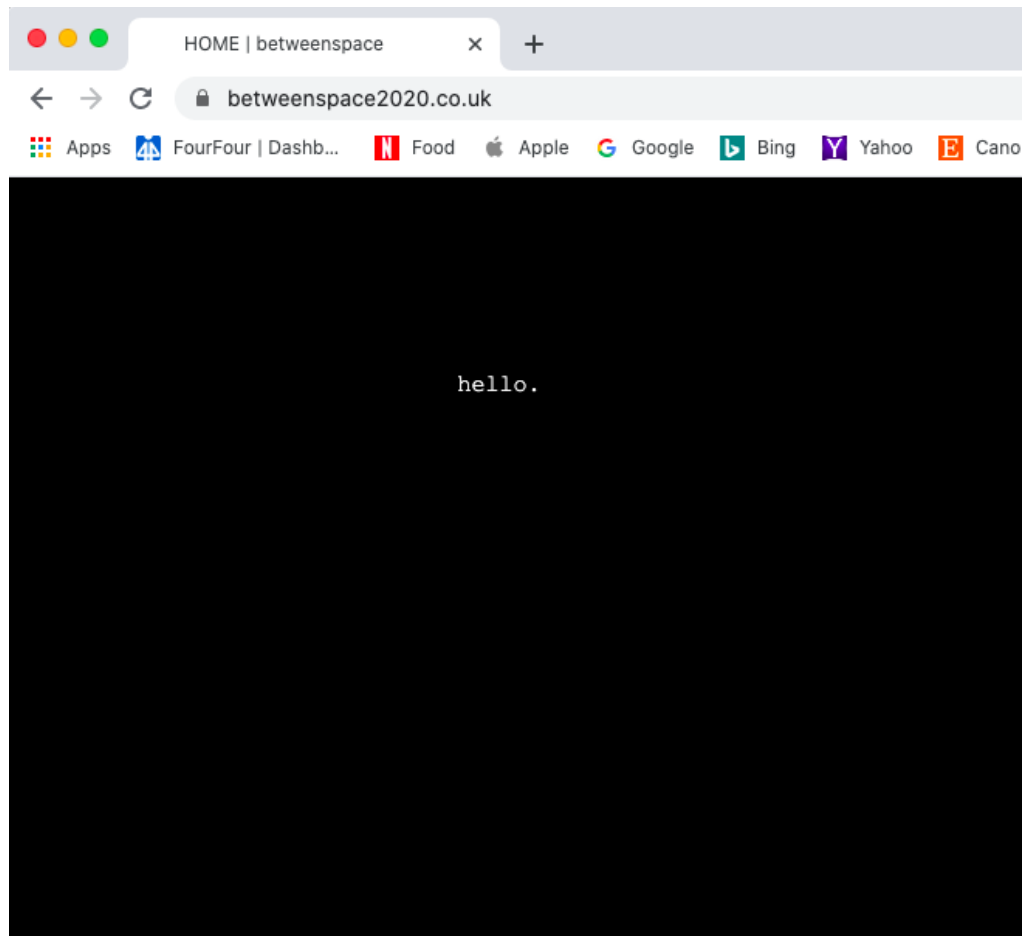


Fig. 1. "*betweenspace* hello," design and photo by Camille Intson

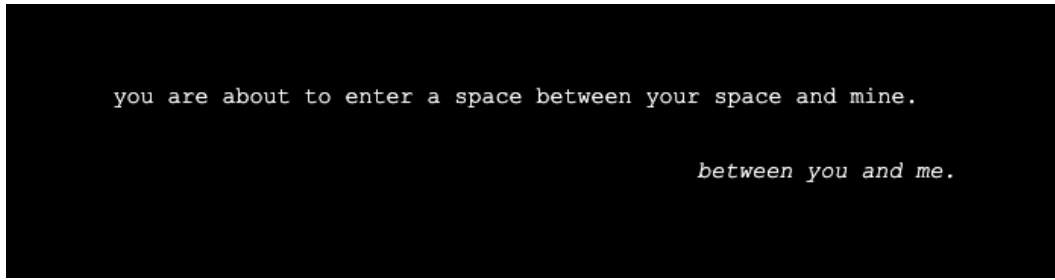


Fig. 2. “*betweenspace* Intro,” design and photo by Camille Intson

## 1. Introduction

When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in March of 2020, I found myself alone and touch deprived for what would become months on end. Quarantined in a garden flat in Kilburn, London, I was in the process of completing my postgraduate degree with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama’s Performance Practice as Research cohort. I was already engaged with a live intermedial performance praxis, which involved numerous failed attempts to give inanimate objects “agency” as “actors” in a live performance setting. I took my failures in stride and assumed this fixation on object-ontology was short-lived. That was until the first lockdown in the United Kingdom, when I found myself hyper-attuned to the physical spaces, materials, and objects in my vicinity. It was as if my world had contracted to the size of my North London flat, and yet I was experiencing an overwhelming sense of expansion by my consistent use of digital technologies — namely, my phone and laptop — as means of connection: to the world, to my friends and family back home in Canada, to death statistics and Netflix stars, to Boris Johnson in the ICU, to my then-partner in South London, and beyond. My body became my phone, which became the internet, which poured into other phones and other bodies across distributed time and space. When physical contact became unfeasible, I began thinking of intimate touch in the context of my interactions

with digital technologies. It was then that I began circling the question of what a “digital intimacy” could look and feel like, and how it might be capitalized on in performance praxis.

As a performance practitioner-researcher working collaboratively with digital technologies, I find the notion of a digital intimacy, or of a digitally intimate encounter, contradictory yet stimulative. Whereas prevailing ideas of intimacy privilege physical touch, gesture, and copresence, a digital intimacy hinges on the axes of simultaneous presence and absence, virtuality and corporeality, embodiment and disembodiment. These contradictions may at first seem like barriers to the effect of intimacy; however, I argue that, in the deconstruction of their opposition, there exists a fluid and generative space of enquiry through which intimacy is not only possible, but inevitable.



Fig. 3. “*betweenspace* Poster,” design and photo by Camille Intson

My practice-as-research explores the ways in which intimate experience can be generated in performative encounters across digital space, examining the prospect of digital intimacy through

a flat ontological new materialist framework in which interactions between digital and physical media open up spaces of dynamic interactivity. Flat ontological discourse asserts that “there are no essential distinctions between different kinds of things” (Law 6), rejecting the privileging of one sort of entity over all others. Following Rebecca Schneider, I understand new materialism as “[taking] seriously the idea that all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation” (Schneider 7). I will suggest that digitally intimate experiences are a result of complex material interactions between assemblages of bodies, both human and object, and that the emergent “digital” intimacy is no longer exclusively grounded in human-to-human interaction, but also in human-to-object. My focus on object-interactions as sites of intimacy reveals that, when we reject rigid boundaries between technology and the self, the human and the non-human, and the digital and the physical, we can open ourselves up to new forms of intimate interactions between humans, objects, and computers.

Drawing on psychological concepts of intimacy and materialist philosophies, I began to develop a practice of creating digital spaces for intimate “one-to-one” encounters. Using web design/HTML and embedded widgets, I programmed assemblages of text, hyperlinks, and competing intermedia for participant interaction. This culminated in the creation of a digital work, entitled [\*betweenspace\*](#), which exists across media, namely text, image, video, and hyperlinks, in the form of an interactive website. By and through a process of disclosing my own personal experience of living in quarantine during the pandemic, I led participants through an interactive map of my flat, prompting them to interact with images and text boxes that told my stories and encouraged them to reflect and write in their own. The aim of *betweenspace* was to facilitate a space of togetherness and intimacy from my body, through the computer, to another computer, to



another body, although the connections are not this linear. I then asked participants to reflect on their experiences by responding to a series of open-ended survey questions.

This paper analyzes retrospectively the development of my practice and its emergent form with the launch of *betweenspace* at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama's annual Brink Festival. It will take conclusions from the practice-as-research to understand how a "digital" intimacy can be generated through assemblages of physical and digital, human and nonhuman matter.

## **2. Theorizing Intimacy**

To arrive at one single definition of intimacy is implausible. The concept of intimacy is always already resisting fixity due to its fluid and subjective experiential nature, and therefore tension arises within the practice-as-research when we attempt to place limits on its definition. This is why, following psychologist Karen Prager, I believe that an understanding of intimacy as a multi-tiered superordinate "concept," under which basic concepts are assumed, is a more appropriate model for qualifying intimacy in the context of my practice-as-research (Prager 17).

In Prager's multi-tiered model, the superordinate level "intimacy" can be broken down into two basic camps: intimate interactions and intimate relationships. Intimate interactions are simply defined as "dyadic communicative exchanges [...] that [exist] within a clearly designated space-and-time framework, [wherein] [...] once that [...] behaviour has ceased, the interaction is over" (3). Contrastingly, intimate relationships are those "in which people have a history and anticipate a future of intimate contact over time" (3). My practice-as-research is primarily concerned with the former. I am not preoccupied with establishing a long-term relationship between myself and

the participants of *betweenspace*; I am more concerned with the interactions between us within the set frame of the work.

Prager's "intimate interactions" can be further broken down into subordinate categories of intimate behaviours and intimate experiences. Intimate behaviours refer to "the actual observable behaviours people engage in when interacting intimately, whether these are verbal or nonverbal (eg. self-disclosure, attentive listening)" (19). What these behaviours *are* will naturally vary across diverse perspectives and is complicated when taking place online and across digital spaces. Intimate experiences are conversely defined as "the feelings and perceptions people have during and because of their intimate interactions (e.g. warmth, pleasure, affection)" (19). To facilitate an intimate interaction, one must trigger intimate experiences by way of intimate behaviours. This is precisely what I was testing for through *betweenspace*.

It must be noted that Prager is not speaking of intimacy in a performative or theatrical setting, although performance scholars including Bruce Barton (2008), Rachel Gomme (2015), Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan (2012), and Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson (2010) have utilized Prager's model when speaking in terms of performance. A performative intimacy is naturally contradictory as the roles of "the performer" and "the participant" are clearly established in the context of the work, and if the aim of the one-to-one performance is to establish some form of intimacy, that preordained fact may easily work against that intimacy being established. Participants may not feel willing or able to open up, if that is what is "expected" of them in the context of performance, which is inextricable from corporate or capital gains that also work against the development of intimacy. This is why Bruce Barton suggests that:

A theoretically performative intimacy is one in which the basic criteria identified across multiple definitions of intimacy—a willingness to self-disclose; full, positive, and mutual

attention; openness to physical contact and connection; shared understanding—is valued and pursued outside the context of extended aesthetic, corporate, or emotional contracts. It is an intimacy predicated on the devaluation—even rejection—of fictional, thematic, and organizational predictability and familiarity. It is an intimacy not of mutual familiarity, but rather one in which intimate disclosures may occur in interactions between strangers precisely because of the unlikelihood of a further relationship and the attendant opportunities for betrayal. (Barton 82)

To put it simply, in order to have an intimate encounter in the context of performance, that intimate encounter must be somehow genuine and pursued for its own end, and not solely for the end of the performance. This is, naturally, a difficult balance to strike. *betweenspace* demanded that I open myself up, in the most honest way possible, to others, despite not knowing what I would receive in return. The work also positions my spectator-participants as voyeurs, as invisible watchers and consumers of my intimate self-disclosures.

My first objective in conducting this research was negotiating what “intimate behaviours,” in the context of Prager’s work, look like online. A digitally intimate interaction is an interaction in which two bodies are not present in the same space. This makes certain interactions which would normally be considered foundations of intimacy, for example intimate touch, gesture, and body language, impossible. In the context of theatre and performance art, although these mediums rely on a co-presence between spectator and audience member, the division of these two roles limits what “intimate behaviours” can occur. This is something I had to take into consideration when establishing the roles of the spectator-participants in relationship to myself as the facilitator and leading artist. At the beginning of this stage of research, I identified the behaviours most commonly attributed to intimacy across diverse psychological and performance-based perspectives. Prager cites “self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings” (45) as base intimate behaviours, whereas Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan write that intimate behaviours “[enable] two sentient beings, who feel comfortable enough with each

other on an emotional and/or physical level, to reveal something about themselves and connect in some form of meaningful exchange” (1). Lisa M. Register and Tracy B. Henley also write of intimacy as “the removal of boundaries between people,” which struck me as difficult in the context of my research (472). The internet and the computer are undeniable boundaries between people, yet at the same time these media have connective — and, I argue, intimate — capabilities. I eventually came up with a list that attempted to translate these intimate behaviours into actions that could take place across a digital interface. This list read as follows:

#### INTIMATE BEHAVIOURS IN DIGITALLY INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS:

- Exploring another’s online space and the objects or items within it.
- Reading another person’s intimate self-disclosures and personal narratives.
- Exchanging personal details through the web.
- Consent-based exchanges: giving viewers “the choice” whether or not to engage with certain items.
- Curating spaces of self-reflection, asking intimate questions and prompting answers. Typing into content boxes and opening up reciprocal dialogues between persons.
- Trespassing and infiltrating boundaries “together”: providing experiences to transgress spatial or information-based boundaries.

During this time, I became interested in the genre of electronic literature, and specifically in the works of J.R. Carpenter (<http://luckysoap.com>). Carpenter’s digital literature projects fuse text, image, and interactive media together to create a multi-sensory poetic experience for her readers. I was struck by the non-linear and rhizomatic nature of her work, and took pleasure in my being able to curate the online experience for myself, using my mouse and keypad to navigate her digital spaces. Something profound registered when I engaged with this work; I became hyper-

attuned to how I was interacting *materially* with digital and physical matter. I experienced pleasure in being able to press keys on my personal device and change the work's poetic structure, controlling the appearance of maps and descriptions of landscapes in Carpenter's *this is a picture of wind*, just as I was somehow controlling the coastal weather of the world inside the work. I was therefore inspired to use HTML and web design applications to create my own web-based interactive experience, setting up a mock "apartment" that could be explored by participants on their personal devices. Participants could click around the site, engage with hyperlinks, and find hidden stories and objects, all the while being "guided" by myself as an invisible host-figure. The host-figure of *betweenspace* is present in the work as a first person singular narrator, feigning the illusion of presence at every step.

The first instalment of *betweenspace* ended with a data collection survey, which asked a series of phenomenological open-ended questions to gauge how successful my adapted "intimate behaviours" were in producing "intimate experiences." Some of these questions were as follows:

Describe how you felt about the experience as a whole. Was it positive? Negative? Somewhere in between? Please describe your feelings in a few sentences or bullet points.

Describe your relationship to your host/the owner of this space. Do you feel like you got to know them? Did you feel connected to the host throughout the process? Why or why not? Please describe your experience in a few sentences or bullet points.

What parts of the work stuck out to you or provoked a particularly strong reaction for you? Try, as best you can, to identify your feelings in those moments.

What is intimacy to you? How would you personally define it?

Do you feel this project provided an experience of intimacy? Why or why not?

In the following sections, I will delve deeper into participant responses and introduce two key features of the work.

### **3. Intimacy and Textuality**

Text is an integral part of the intimacy of *betweenspace*. It describes and contextualizes objects, is employed as a tool of communication between myself and the participants, and is oftentimes layered over images and video clips to inform participants's experiences of the spaces they are "visiting." Textual animations flow over and between certain objects and spaces, thus creating a more dynamic visual experience. Throughout the work, participants are led through a series of personal anecdotes and disclosures, all through different styles of writing: poetry, prose, combinations of autobiographical writing and critical theory, and informal captions.

It is herein important to consider the materiality of the digital text. N. Katherine Hayles conceptualizes digital text as an "event," as opposed to an "object," which moves from "a binary opposition between embodiment and information through an engagement with the materiality of literary texts to a broadening and deepening of these ideas into computation and textuality" (3). Jerome Fletcher similarly writes of the performativity of the digital text, emphasizing the physical corporeality of engagement with electronic literature (19). Past scholarship on digital textuality and interactive narrative navigation, for instance that of Per Persson (1998) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2005), has emphasized a way of thinking around digital materiality that considers corporeality and interactivity between the body and the "event" of the text.

*betweenspace* uses hyperlinks and hover boxes to allow participants to click or "hover" above certain objects in the images embedded onto each webpage, revealing anecdotes about my time spent in quarantine. Among these are stories of, for instance, being able to tell time in

lockdown by observing beams of light through my kitchen window, my experiences with disordered eating and being forced to cook in quarantine, and one particularly cheeky autotheoretical note on faeces and vibrant matter. Based on the survey responses, the sections containing my intimate self-disclosures felt the most intimate:

Intimacy felt most apparent when, as a user, I felt like I was being brought into a conversation of understanding the host's experience. That there was space to accommodate a you and a me and the complex relations that develop in between.

The deep sharing made me want to know more about you and encouraged me to reciprocate my own sharing to give you more of myself.

Participants also stated that my self-disclosures made them reflect on their own domestic space, as well as on their own experiences in lockdown. They also encouraged the same participants to want to reciprocate by writing back to me. Participants felt that intimacy was achieved when they felt like they were brought into a conversation of understanding my experience.

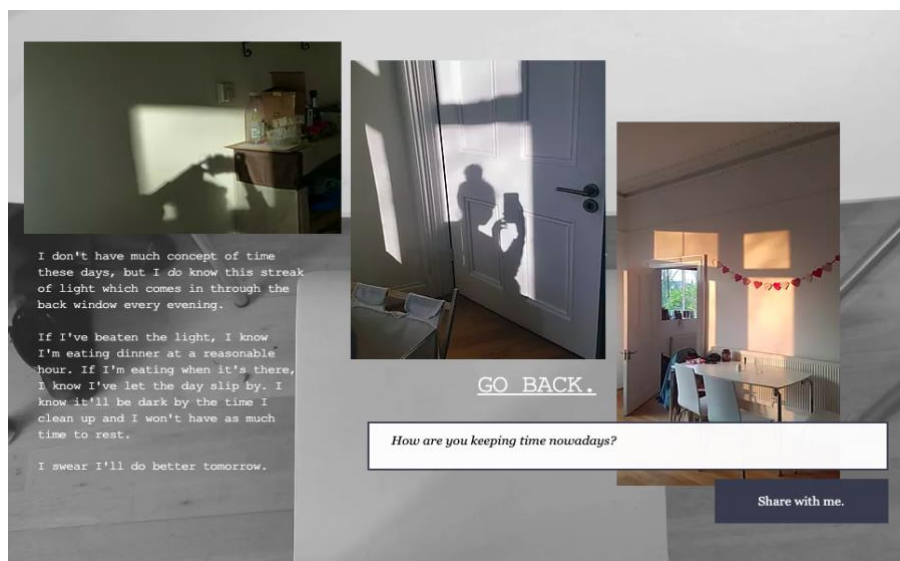


Fig. 4. “*betweenspace* kitchen table,” design and photo by Camille Intson

Text boxes also allowed for intimate exchanges between myself and the participants. To facilitate a more “dyadic communicative [exchange]” (Prager 3), I created form submission widgets where participants could write back to me, answering question prompts based on my various pieces of writing. Besides these question prompts, it is worth noting, there is also an e-mail submission form where participants can freely write back to me, knowing that I will be able to respond to these specific messages. Quite a few participants were enthusiastic in their responses, feeling an intimacy in the reciprocity.

I wrote in all of the boxes - I felt power in being able to anonymously submit responses, and to get responses from Camille in return.

One of the text-box prompts also really resonated with what I was thinking about, so I felt compelled to share. It was actually quite validating.

These text boxes were intended to build trustful relationships of mutual self-disclosure between myself and anonymous participants. Karen Prager defines “trust” in relation to “intimacy” as “an attitude or expectation that one partner has toward another that allows that partner to take the risks involved in an intimate interaction” (Prager 25). She writes that, “[s]ince intimacy involves revealing the vulnerable parts of the self, partners must trust one another to continue to interact intimately, almost by definition” (25). Through Prager’s philosophies of intimacy, I had come to understand intimacy as something that had to be reciprocated. That participants had to trust me, as a virtual host, to continue to make them feel welcome and comfortable in my space; consequently, I had to trust my participants with my personal narratives. To foster this mutual relationship of trust, I revealed intimate parts of myself to encourage participants to do the same. This exchange of text and experience, I believed, was a core interaction of the work.



What I was unaware of, in this matter, was that I had put myself in a vulnerable position by placing unconditional trust in the anonymous audience of internet participants that could stumble upon the site, and read my personal narratives, at any time. This space is conducive to risk on my end, not only of embarrassment but abandonment as some participants preferred not to comment. This was for a wide variety of reasons. Some participants couldn't articulate why they did not want to write back to me:

I prefer silently observing and to give my thoughts on a different forum afterwards.

I'm not sure why I didn't. Maybe I would if I visited again.

Several participants surprised me by writing that the only reason they chose to write back to me was out of social obligation, and not necessarily the kind of "feeling seen" as described in the earlier responses. They responded, not because it enhanced the experience of intimacy for them, but because they felt like they had to. A variety of these responses can be seen as follows:

I did, even though it felt uncomfortable at times. I felt the honesty the host shared need to be honoured through reciprocation.

I think there is an underlying prompt of social politeness in answering questions whether verbally or in writing.

Interestingly enough, each of the participants who responded to the prompts out of obligation still wrote, at the end of the survey, that the experience was one of intimacy for them. Hence, clearly, reciprocity was not a mandatory condition for all, and, for some, the feeling/experience of intimacy was generated simply by looking through the virtual platform and experiencing my call for intimacy for themselves.

Herein was the biggest problem: while I'd achieved this effect of facilitating intimacy for participants through a digital platform, I'd compromised myself in the process because I had set up a unique relationship with participants, which put me at a disadvantage as I was sharing, quite openly, without reciprocity. The work felt intimate to them, but did not have the same affect for me; I had simultaneously succeeded and failed in my endeavour. I had curated an intimate experience for some participants while leaving myself to feel abandoned. While there was certainly a power imbalance present in the work, one which I had conceived of and facilitated, somehow I expected participants to want to engage with me more.

I therefore believe that *betweenspace* propagates an intimacy with the assemblage of materials, and not with me as a host. I cannot be the subject of the intimacy when subjectivity is in continuous flow between media and materials, and perhaps this is the nature of a digital (or mediated) intimacy. While it encourages the sharing of intimate information, it does not necessarily produce reciprocity. At the end of the festival, I was forced to reflect on my feelings of abandonment and the ways in which I had or hadn't experienced intimacy as a part of the assemblage. I myself felt most intimate with the work when I received messages from participants through the anonymous text boxes. Throughout the duration of the Brink Festival, I had these text box responses linked up to notifications on my Gmail account. Whenever someone wrote in one of the boxes, my phone would ring and I would know that someone was, at that moment, "in my bathroom" or "in my garden." When this occurred, sometimes I would actually go out to those spaces and look around. I was viscerally affected by these notifications and they did bring me a sense of intimacy in comfort, although of course I knew, logically, that I was alone in my flat. I realize that this exemplar in itself is not about me feeling "intimate" with another person, per se,

but with the affect produced by the intersections of media, technologies, and bodies as a whole — that is, with the assemblage created by the installation en large.

I would further suggest that the intimacy produced by the assemblage of these digitally intimate encounters is as much “with the self” as it is of the materials and matter that constitutes the work. It is an intimacy sought through performance that Rachel Gomme describes as “with self,” in that the work provides a space of contemplation where the participant can reflect on their own experiences, on what the work brought up for them personally (Gomme 292). This, I believe, is another facet of the simultaneous solitude and connectivity of the digital space. As Lynn Jamieson describes, of a digital intimacy:

It is an intimacy of the self rather than the body, although it might be enhanced by bodily intimacy. It is theoretically possible for the practice of self-disclosure to occur online, mediated by digital technology, either generating a fleeting sense of intimacy between hitherto strangers or developing the intimacy of an already established relationship that began with co-presence. (Jamieson 18)

These feelings of self-reflection were brought up time and time again by participants who used the work as a tool to reflect on themselves, as opposed to communicate directly with me. Many survey responses I was sent from participants included stories and anecdotes that they did not share in the text boxes. My space reminded them of other spaces and other people; my space triggered personal reminders and memories from their own lives.

Some participants may have felt a barrier to me as a human, due to the limits of the medium, however they were still left with the intimacy of the assemblage. My work had touched my participants, yet they had left me behind, and I had in a sense left myself behind in the conception of the work. I did not feel cared for, and yet still I felt comfort in the fact that people were viewing my most intimate spaces and, in a sense, validating my experience of loneliness and longing for others. That made me feel less alone, even if I ultimately was.

I know now this paradox is at the heart of the thing we call digital intimacy. This is a quasi-object oriented intimacy where something of the human is lost, and yet intimacy itself is not lost; these paradoxes I will go on to discuss further in the following section and the Conclusion, where I will offer my final thoughts on this iteration of practice and research.

#### 4. The Participant as Performer-Activator

At the start of *betweenspace*, participants are invited to have a “look,” or a “click,” around the series of webpages that are constructed to resemble a tour of my flat. Here, the participant’s personal device not only connects them to the experience, but allows them to have control over where they move in the flat and what they see, what areas they wish to visit, and which actions they wish to undertake while there. Each participant will naturally click on different things and visit different areas, and therefore the participant becomes an integral part of the assemblage of media surrounding them.



Fig. 5. “*betweenspace* landing,” design and photo by Camille Intson

I understand the participant's role as something of a "performer-activator," which is a term coined by live performance artist Jo Scott to represent a hybrid role which posits the onstage performer as an activator of the live media elements *onstage* (Scott 3). In each of her works, Scott both "performs" and engages each of the technologies present onstage, which can include projectors, live video feeds, and soundscapes. She is both actor and technician; she is visible to her audience, even when performing functions that are usually seen from spectators's vantage points. In *betweenspace*, the job of the participant is to click on and activate the media elements of the work, thus curating their own experience in navigating through the piece. The participant's agency becomes a key component of the work; they are participating in the work, but also "performing" as "themselves" in how they navigate through the world of *betweenspace*, and especially in what they write back to me in the provided text bodes.

*betweenspace* participants have described a sense of pleasure in clicking to navigate between spaces and discovering the content within. The art of navigating freely around "my space," the agency the participant had in where they went, and the consent-based approach to self-disclosure helped foster a sense of intimacy between us.

Everything felt very "eye of the host" when I looked somewhere or clicked to move through the space, as though I was seeing the space as the host does. The sharing of personal thoughts, reflections, images, and notes all made me also want to share in those places where I was able to and connect in that way as well.

I was disappointed when I'd clicked through everything I could find because the experience of hunting for a link and then uncovering the content was very engaging and made me be an active participant.

Certain rooms inevitably allow us access to personal segments of her routines and her body, but in asking the user/audience whether we want to cooperate and explore further, allows for a more welcoming relationship, as there is no force or pressure.

Many participants described the feeling that nothing was “off limits” in my space; all felt “invited” to participate, and no participants (out of the twenty-five surveyed) wrote that they ever felt pressured or in any way uncomfortable with the interface. Despite many participants writing that they felt some form of connection with me as a host figure through my personal stories, others interrogated the way that they were engaging with the interface of the computer.

These comments were particularly provocative to me:

I am aware that I was moving between specific conceptions of space, attached to individual experience, i.e. mine/yours. However, I was also navigating in familiarity in the context of a web interface.

[...] the minimalist layout, user-friendly structure, and lack of sound made the virtual space quite welcoming for me.

The feeling of being “welcomed” was not *only* indebted to my consent-based approach and self-disclosures, but also to the familiarity that participants had with the web as an interface. Intimacy was felt in the interactions with mouse, keyboard, webpage, and embedded media, which corresponded with participants’s digital interactions with physical objects in my domestic space. These interactions between physical and digital objects contributed to the overall positive experience of the participants.

As Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross write, “bodies are presupposed by the media [...] [and] media technologies engage audiences because their design interfaces with, and amplifies, sensory dimensions of the human body” (Nightingale and Ross 19). *betweenspace* is programmed to do exactly this; the interface itself is designed so that the screens on each webpage present a perspective of the flat that would normally be seen by an in-person visitor. These photographs presuppose a body because they provide participants with a first person point of view of the apartment, just as they would see if they were physically visiting. The computer screen becomes



I therefore am brought back to the conclusion reached at the end of the preceding section, which is that participants weren't necessarily being intimate "with" *me*, but with every object and material I had created or involved as a part of the assemblage of the work. While this seems like a logical facet of the project, I did not realize how this would make participants feel about the experience as a whole. This was reflected in a few select responses from the surveys:

So I had these questions: What was I becoming intimate with? The place/the experiences within the place/ a host/ an artist who made the work?

And I want to clarify that throughout my experience, I intensified a feeling of intimacy with the work and not necessarily with a "host" figure.

While I think this project provides an experience of intimacy, and there is a voice which narrates your journey with a second, other person, because I could not see or hear (aloud) an individual (aside from a few photos/videos, most of which were segmented by body part and did not feel like full people). The images of rooms, while clearly lived in, lacked the people which inhabited them. They were photos of empty rooms. I felt like I was exploring the home on my own - not as much so with a guide.

What struck me as interesting was that, even though these participants felt more intimate with the material assemblage of the work than with myself as a host figure, this did not diminish the experience of intimacy produced by the overall work. Each of these participants described *betweenspace* as an intimate experience, but they were unsure of what they were intimate with; with me? With the computer? With the work, or with the place-within-the-work? My answer is, quite simply, with everything together. I believe that, in *betweenspace*, intimacy is generated in the continuous flow and connections between materials in the assemblage. All materials in the assemblage work together to allow for dynamic participant interactions between text, image, object, space (web and physical), human bodies and stories, video, sound, and the computer and its physical attributes that control actions taken through the digital interface.



## Conclusion

It has become clear to me that *betweenspace* brings human bodies (both real and represented), computers, objects (both real and represented), spaces (both real and represented), and text together in a non-linear, rhizomatic assemblage where no material is prioritized in the formation of the work. As I have noted throughout this article, digital intimacy is produced as a result of the intersecting interactions and dynamic interactivity between matter. Participants experienced a digital intimacy by and through the assemblage that invites and involves them, and through interactions between complex configurations of digital and physical media.

What can I now say of the nature of digital intimacy, one which balances so precariously between the human and the non-human, between its successes and its failures?

I have already concluded that a digital intimacy comes to us simultaneously present and absent, corporeal and virtual, embodied and disembodied. I argue that such an intimacy requires a deconstruction of self and subject, a dispersal of self across technologies and materials, which is at once necessary for the facilitation of digital intimacy and precisely the reason it fails. I have stated that to be *digitally* intimate is not to be intimate with another human being, but with objects and materials that constitute assemblages of matter. *betweenspace* can also be said to reveal all the ways that it *resists* intimacy. These limits to what we can or can't experience online become obvious through our engagement with the work. There is something of failure in all that I have done, however I believe this failure is itself generative.

As Sara Jane Bailes writes, of the ethics of failure in context of theatre and performance: “failure produces” (Bailes 3). For Bailes, failure can be understood as “a constituent feature of the existential condition that *makes expression possible even as it forecloses it*” (1). I feel that this idea resonates with the paradox of digital intimacy, because I believe that digital conditions create, and

also destroy, the conditions for intimate interactions. Intimacy remains a perpetual possibility through digital technologies, even if those technologies themselves are inherently isolating.

I believe that the next project which tackles digital intimacy in performance must continue to work along this paradox, finding new ways of heightening interactions between humans and computers to deepen the technological scope of these performances. I am interested in the possibility of virtual and augmented reality projects to tackle questions of digital intimacy, and the ways in which all of these ideas can be pushed forward as technology continues to develop and as we collectively witness a further integration of immersive digital technologies into performance work.

## Works Cited

- Bailes, Sara. *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*. Routledge, 2011.
- Barton, Bruce. "Subjectivity <math>\diamond</math> Culture <math>\diamond</math> Communications <math>\diamond</math> Intermedia: A Meditation on the "Impure Interactions" of Performance and the "In-Between" Space of Intimacy in a Wired World." *Theatre Research in Canada*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 51-92.
- Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Kattenbelt, Chiel, Lavender, Andy, and Nelson, Robin, editors. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. Amsterdam UP, 2010.
- Carpenter, J.R. "J.R. Carpenter." *Luckysoap & Co.*, <http://luckysoap.com/>. Accessed 21 June 2021.
- Chatzichristodoulou, Maria, and Zerihan, Rachel. "Introduction." *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance*, edited by Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 1-14.
- Fletcher, Jerome. "Performing Digital Literature." *Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 18-42.
- Gomme, Rachel. "Not-so-close encounters: Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 281-300.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *My Mother Was a Computer*. Chicago UP, 2010.
- Jamieson, Lynn. *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Polity, 1998.
- Law, John. "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics", *Heterogeneities*, <http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2019MaterialSemiotics.pdf>. Accessed June 27th, 2021.
- Nightingale, Virginia, and Ross, Karen. *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences*. Open UP, 2003.
- Persson, Per. "Supporting Navigation in Digital Environments: A Narrative Approach." RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, [shorturl.at/kJUY0](http://shorturl.at/kJUY0). Accessed 28 August 2021.

Prager, Karen. *The Psychology of Intimacy*. Guilford Press, 1995.

Register, Lisa M., and Henley, Tracy B. "The Phenomenology of Intimacy." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 467-481.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality." *Videogame, Player, Text*, edited by Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska, Manchester UP, 2005, pp. 8-29.

Schneider, Rebecca. "New Materialisms and Performance Studies." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 59, no. 4, MIT, 2015, pp. 7-17.

Scott, Joanne. *Intermedial Praxis and Practice as Research*. Palgrave, 2016.

## **Works Cited**

References: use this style for the reference section

## **On Chiselling, Pruning and Trimming:**

### **Chika Unigwe in Conversation about *Better Never Than Late***

Elisabeth BEKERS and VUB students. Transcribed by Emre OK.

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

#### **Introduction**

Chika Unigwe is a writer of fiction, poetry and educational books and regularly contributes to newspapers in different continents. Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1974, she studied English at the University of Nigeria, before moving to Turnhout, Belgium, with her Belgian husband 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). She has received several creative writing fellowships and served as a judge for literary prizes, including the Man Booker International Prize in 2016. In 2013 she moved to the USA, where she is currently a lecturer at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia. Her most recent work is a collection of short stories entitled *Better Never Than Late* (2019), published by Cassava Republic Press in Abuja & London. Most of the volume's loosely connected stories address the experiences of a group of Nigerian migrants in Turnhout for whom Belgium was an "accidental destination" rather than an aspiration, a motif that also recurs in other works by Unigwe (see Bastida-Rodríguez and Bekers).

This interview took place during a webinar with the author on 30 November 2020 in the context of the “Postcolonial Literature in English” Master course taught by Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers, which in 2020-21 included *Better Never Than Late*. Students in the “Master Taal- en Letterkunde” and the international “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) and prepared and asked the questions.<sup>1</sup> Participants were invited to ask questions or share their observations regarding passages in the text that spoke to them in particular. Emre Ok subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Elisabeth Bekers.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Question:** One of the things that Prof. Bekers emphasized last year was that most of the time literature is not just art for art's sake. It's political. It's social. It's economic. It's a lot of things. And recently I was reading Maximilian Feldner's book on the new African diaspora and one of the things that he was talking about was how some of these writers have to be deliberate in what they write, because for their work to be classified as African literature, it has to meet certain criteria like pan-Africanism or authenticity (Feldner). So, I wanted to ask you as a creative person, to what extent do these external factors influence what you write or how you adapt your stories? In your creative process do you think of where your book can be positioned or how to receive the kind of attention that you would want it to get?

---

<sup>1</sup> Questions were asked by, in alphabetical order, Parham Aledavood, Tara Brusselaers, Cassia Hayward-Fitch, Aliou Jarju, Emmanuella Kyereme, Hira Naz, Christiana Udoh, and Prof. Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez (University of the Balearic Islands).

**Chika Unigwe:** Thank you for that question. I haven't read Maximilian's book yet, but the very short answer to your question is: not at all. I don't think that when I'm writing that I'm thinking of the labelling, because the labelling happens after the book is written. The labelling is not done by the writer, but by others. One of the things that I found interesting when you were introducing my work was that even though my stories are fiction, in some bookstores they are shelved under true stories. So that is a labelling that I can't influence.

One of the earliest lessons I've learnt was from my first editor, a wonderful woman called Ellah Wakama. One of the things Ellah told me was “Always assume knowledge” and I've never forgotten that. Assume that people will understand what you're writing about. What they don't understand, they will look up, if they're interested enough to do so. If I imagine that I am writing for an audience, that audience isn't doing the labelling, that audience is somebody very much like me. Because that is the only way that I can assume knowledge and that is also the only way that I can write truthfully. I've been interested in reading Maximilian's work, because when you were talking about it, there were some things that jumped out at me, one of them being authenticity. Who determines to what extent a writer is authentic? Who determines what is authentic? Who determines to what extent a writer is pan-Africanist, which is a broad and vague term anyway? One of the things you are right about, of course, is that all writing is political. While all writing is political, not all politics is intentional. Some of the political things that come out in the writing might not be things that the writer is even thinking about at the time that they are writing it. We all come to books, or we come to reading, with our own experiences.

So, the very short answer to your question is that I'm not thinking about how a book is going to be labelled when I'm writing. What I tell my students is to just concentrate on telling the story. If you tell a human story, nothing else matters. It's in telling the human story that the politics



comes out. The socio-economic problems come out. When I was writing about Prosperous and Agu [in *Better Never Than Late*] for example, I didn't have a checkbox of things I wanted to tick. I was just thinking, how is Prosperous going to survive in a country where she goes from being middle class to being marginalized, without her husband being in her corner, her husband who has always been her ally but is now focused on fighting for his own survival. For me, that story was more interesting than, for example, the racism or even the domestic violence. Everything else that happens to Prosperous, happens because she is in this space. Her relationship changes because she is in this space. Her way of looking at life changes because she is in this space. Her way of interacting with others changes because she is in this space. That for me was the more interesting question than what are all the check boxes that I have to tick. But I'm not surprised that Maximilian, not having read the book but going by your summary of it, would frame things the way he does, because there is also a faction of African writers and African critics who believe that some Africans, especially Africans being published in the West, are writing for a particular audience and that they are highlighting particular issues because they are writing for this particular audience. I don't think that is a fair assumption. I also don't think that it is a very easy thing to do, to adapt your writing for a particular audience. If I knew how to do that, I would. [Laughs]

**Question:** So which audience then would you be adapting your writing for, if you knew which one?

**Chika Unigwe:** Oh my god! I'd love to do Afro-futurism for young adults. Because it's in vogue and it sells. I'd make millions of dollars and I can buy myself a mansion. I'll do a book that could be called *Harry Potter: Set in Nigeria* whatever. Books that are easily classifiable, like *Game of*

*Thrones: Set in Nigeria in the Year 2052.* It would be so easy to sell that my agent would be really happy, because we'd both be millionaires.

**Question:** I would like to share an observation about the characters Ada and Ijeoma in the title story “Better Never Than Late.” As an African, I think evil spirits are very common, especially in West Africa, including the country where I am from. I was reading this book and I can see myself in it. When I was reading it, I felt so much guilt, that I felt like you were talking to me. That was the reason why I had to reach out to you, that was why I had to call back home, to clarify what we did. We once had a cousin staying with us. At some point in time, my mom told me that she was possessed. I was laughing, but she said, “This is serious. This girl does not sleep at night; she touches everyone in their beds.” I went to an Imam and he told me that my cousin was possessed, so he came to remove the possession from her. All the old women came to my house and the girl was called. She was stripped of her clothes and she was naked. They poured salt water on her and then she was yelling that she was innocent. But reading from the book, I think because of the pressure that they put on her, she accepted and said, "I am what you say I am." I was shocked and said “No, this isn't possible.” I asked them to let me talk to her, but they refused. Let me read from the last paragraph of “Better Never Than Late”:

Then a song of thanksgiving began. Deep in her heart, where relief should have been a river flowing, Kambi discovered instead that a heartburn had lodged itself, holding her around her neck, so that when she opened her mouth to sing, she could only whisper, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!”

This was exactly the kind of guilt I was feeling. I felt so emotional. What if we are wrong and she is not possessed as the Imam said? After reading this, I had to call home. I asked my cousin “Do you remember what happened to you five years ago?” and she said, “Yes.” “Is it really true?” She

kept laughing and she told me, “I don't even know what they did to me.” So your book revealed so many things to me; it was like a reflection of what really happened to me. I feel so much guilt; I am sorry for my cousin. So that's the comment I wanted to make.

**Chika Unigwe:** Thank you for sharing that really sad and touching story and I'm really sad that this happened to your cousin. You're right, very often in our cultures when things happen to people and they can't explain those things, they look to other places for answers. Sometimes the people who are providing those answers are really just manipulative and exploiting them. I think that we all probably know these stories. I've always been very suspicious of certain evangelical practices. This was my way of exploring them. One of the things that I always tell people when they ask “Why do you write?” I say that I write to answer my own questions. I always write out of a sense of curiosity. All of the stories in the collection, all the works I have done really, are born out of curiosity. These are questions that I am trying to answer and the only way I can answer them is by writing about them extensively, by thinking about them a lot, and then the ultimate articulation of that thinking is my writing. Thank you for sharing your story and you shouldn't feel guilty. I think we've all done things that we are guilty of. And if you are guilty by omission rather than commission, you are fine.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** Thank you both. I think what you were saying about your motivation of writing: I can't write. I'm not a fiction writer but this is exactly my reason for reading. Trying to explore issues, trying to figure things out, trying to understand other perspectives, trying to learn more about the world at large, trying to see how limited my knowledge and experiences are, how much more there is out there. So, I find it very important to have fiction writers taking us into all these

worlds and making us think about issues that maybe we're not confronted with in our daily lives or that we are very much confronted with and the fiction can help us think about this and revisit things that we had brushed under the carpet for so long. So, I really believe in the power of fiction, also for readers.

**Question:** “Better Never Than Late” is indeed a very sad, beautiful, and touching story, but I was wondering why you put it in this collection. We had some discussions around this in class, but it didn't really convince me as to why you put this story in the collection. My second question relates to the cover of the book. The cover of the English edition published by Cassava Republic has as subtitle “Stories about the tragedy of arrival and the yearning for home in Belgium.” I wanted to ask you whether or not it was you who chose this subtitle, because I saw in other books by this publisher that they put these kind of subtitles. Was it you who wrote it?

**Chika Unigwe:** No, I didn't choose it. I think it is their way of putting their own blurb on the cover of the book, so that it is easy for people who pick it up to know what the book is about in a nutshell. No, I didn't choose it, but I endorsed it. As to your other question, I'm curious to know what the explanation you got in class was.

**Question:** It was suggested that the little girl Ijeoma could be seen as a migrant too because she has come from her homeland village to the city to work, so it could be seen as some sort of a replica of immigration. We know that Kambi is related to Agu and Prosperous, so in a way we could see how their lives could've been if they had stayed home. This explanation didn't really convince me.

**Chika Unigwe:** I like that explanation. I'm going to steal that. [Laughs] Ijeoma is also somewhat a migrant because she leaves her home and comes to the city. That's one explanation. I haven't read the story in a while, but if I remember correctly, I think that at some point when Kambi's cousin is trying to encourage her to take Ijeoma to the pastor for an exorcism, she mentions that Ijeoma is probably responsible for Agu and Prosperous not having any children. The third explanation is that Kambi is related to Agu. Because one of the common denominators in the entire collection is Agu's family. Everybody in the book is somehow related to Agu and Prosperous, either as a blood relative or a friend. I wanted them really to be the people holding the collection together. I wanted every single life in the book to be linked back to them. Even though this is a short story collection, I wanted it to read like a novel. I wanted there to be in every story something that could deepen or add some sharpness to Agu's or Prosperous's story. So, when you read *Better Never Than Late* and you read about Ijeoma being accused of being responsible for Prosperous not having a child and then you're reading in another story that Prosperous does not want a child and that she is very consciously preventing herself from getting pregnant. It adds another layer of understanding to both stories. In that way, the stories talk to each other. So that story is there for those three reasons: one, because it's talking to the narratives of Agu and Prosperous; two, because Ijeoma is a migrant too; three, because Kambi is related to Agu.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** One of the related questions that we were discussing. How important was the sequence to you because we were discussing this? What if we read them in a different sequence? Because one of the questions that we were tackling was: Is this a short story sequence and to what extent is the order of the stories important? I think we all agreed that the final story had to be at

the end, and that some of them had to be positioned towards the beginning, but about the rest we weren't really sure. We were wondering how definite this order was for you.

**Chika Unigwe:** I love reading short stories. It is one of my favourite genres to read, and I never read short stories chronologically. So, the order wasn't at all important for me. I'm not even sure that I chose the order. I don't remember, because it's been a while. It might have been my editor who chose the order. I feel like people should be able to pick up a short story and read it in one go. Every short story should be a complete world on its own, but a collection like this where the stories are all linked should be able to provide a fuller picture, regardless of the way in which you read it. Maybe it gives a different experience if you read it chronologically. I think the stories are arranged chronologically in order of when they happened, because I know I had to map out a timeline for my editor. I think she thought that, because the stories were linked, it would be a better experience to read them chronologically. Or at least for the stories to be filed chronologically, but it's not that important to me honestly. Because that's not how I read short stories.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** It's a nice humbling lesson for us literary critics who start to read all kinds of meanings into this and then the author tells us “Well, actually....”

**Question:** Kind of relating to the short story aspect of the collection, you mentioned that you wanted all the stories to tie back to Prosperous. Was the decision to make a short story collection and not a novel about Prosperous just because of your love of short stories or was there anything more to that decision?

**Chika Unigwe:** I think that because the stories started life as short stories... I think that the structure of the work only comes to me after I start writing. For example, the second story “Finding Faith,” which sort of started life as a novel, *The Phoenix*, and I was sort of never satisfied with it as a novel, and I didn't know why I wasn't satisfied with it as a novel until I wrote it as a short story and it worked a whole lot better. Everything completely changed and I felt a lot more satisfaction with it. The same thing with the other stories. Prosperous's life came to me as a short story. I decided to follow that path. I'm not sure the stories would've worked well as a novel because short stories gave me the chance to explore different things. I could talk about Añuli's encounter with the young men on the train; I could talk about Prosperous's encounter with the woman that she cleans for; I could talk about Tine and Godwin and all of these people. In a way that never felt overwhelming, but if I had put all of that in a novel, it would've been overwhelming. Having all these different plot points, maybe ten different plot points, would be too much for a novel. I wanted the freedom to tackle as many plot points as I wanted, without it feeling overdone.

**Question:** I noticed you write different types of literature, poetry, short stories, novels, and I was wondering if you have different ways of approaching these different modes of writing. My second question is if you've ever surprised or even scared yourself with your writing.

**Chika Unigwe:** When I write a short story, I find that I tend to write a short story in one go and then it's the revising that takes sometimes months to do. But the easiest way for me to write a short story is to write it in one go. I found that any short story that I start and don't finish in one sitting I rarely ever go back to. Because it means it hasn't fully formed. For me, the short story starts here [points at her head] and all I have to do is pour it out. And if I stop pouring it out and it gets stuck,

then I know that it isn't fully formed. I can't think of any short story that I started, not finished, and then come back to. The short story I have to pour out in one go. And then I give it a few days to marinate. And then I go back, and then I go back, and then I go back. I chisel, and I prune, and I trim, and I do all the things that need to be done to it. A novel takes a lot longer for me. With novels I do word counts. I tell myself "I'm going to write maybe five hundred words a day." If I manage to do it or I do more, I reward myself with a new pair of shoes, because I love shoes. Or I tell myself if I hit this number of words in a week then I can take myself shopping, which I also absolutely love. [laughs]

I just started writing some poetry again. I used to do poetry when I was in Nigeria. That was actually how I got into writing, by poetry. I did poetry a lot. And then I moved to Belgium in 1995 with my Belgian husband and suddenly I was in this space where nothing I knew mattered at all. The fact that I knew English didn't matter. The fact that I had a university degree didn't matter. I was in this space where people looked at me and thought that they knew me. I was in this space where I couldn't talk to anyone where my husband's life just continued because he got his job maybe a few months after we moved back to Belgium. He went off to work and I was at home – I never wanted to get married and sit at home. That wasn't the life I envisaged for myself. Going to college in Nigeria, I had a totally different vision for my life. Before moving to Belgium, my only experience with the West was England. I had been to London as a kid and my uncles lived in London and they all had good jobs. My father's brother was an attorney, my mother's brother was an engineer, so I assumed if you moved abroad, you got a job. Suddenly, here I was. My siblings lived in the States, and their lives sort of continued, but there I was in this place where I couldn't do anything. The culture was completely alien; the language was completely alien. I couldn't even go to the bakery and buy bread. I suffered panic attacks and because of these panic attacks I



couldn't do any kind of writing at all, not even poetry. When I eventually got back to writing, I realized that I couldn't write poetry anymore. So now, once in a while I write something and post it on Instagram but I still don't call it poetry. I actually call the posts “not a poem” because I'm not at that stage where I am prepared to say that what I'm doing now is poetry. I didn't think that moving to a new place would do that to me but what it did basically was steal my muse. The poetry muse just sort of went away. It was scary.

The second part of your question: Has anything ever surprised me? Yes. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, whom I absolutely love, once said that – and I'm paraphrasing him here – “Writers are like Cassandra, doomed to prophesy but never to be believed.” So, there are things that I have written about that eventually happen and that scares the shit out of me. So yes, there are things that I've written that surprised me, things that I've written that scared me. Just for how prophetic they turned out to be. And listening to one of you talk about his cousin's experience, when I wrote that story “Better Never Than Late,” it was purely a work of imagination. Then to hear that it had happened to someone almost word for word. That is surprising, that is scary.

**Question:** Based on your own life history, could we say that Prosperous in *Better Never Than Late* is based on your own life story? Maybe not entirely but maybe somehow.

**Chika Unigwe:** I think that maybe we only think what Prosperous and I share is that we both moved from Nigeria to Belgium. We both know what it is like to move from a place of familiarity and a place of comfort to a place where you have to begin from scratch. We are both Igbo women, but Prosperous is a much better cook than I am and her migration is completely different from mine. I moved with a Belgian husband, so in a way I had a community; I had his family. For want

of a better word, my assimilation was somewhat different than Prosperous's, but the obstacles were all the same. For example, I took a break between my post-grad and my PhD and I went to look for a job. So, I walked into an interim bureau [job agency] and told the woman at the counter that I was looking for a job. She said, "Oh yes, we need cleaners and you can start today." Coming to a place where suddenly people felt like they could label you or that they could put you in a box because of your skin colour, I know what that feels like and so does Prosperous. These are the things that we have in common, but I also think that if writers only wrote about people like them, then we'd not be able to write a lot.

I think that the work a writer does is to imagine the life that people who are not like them live. I think that one of the reasons why I find it very difficult to write poetry these days is because poetry is very intimate, and I find it very difficult to write about myself and I would find it even more difficult to write about my personal experiences in fiction. The experiences I share with Prosperous are also experiences that anybody in our situation would share with us. Living in Turnhout, I had a friend who did engineering in Nigeria and moved to Belgium and who up until today works in a factory as an *arbeidster*, a labourer. I also know somebody who did architecture who is an *arbeider*, a factory worker. These stories are not atypical of the Africans I knew in Belgium, especially Africans from anglophone countries who come to Belgium and have to struggle with a new language. Belgium is very insular that way. If you don't have Dutch, if you don't have French, and maybe English and German, then you're completely locked out of the labour market. It doesn't matter how many degrees you have, unless of course you're an expatriate and you come from somewhere else; then you're working in an environment where English is the language used.

**Question:** When will we find your novel *The Black Messiah* published in English? I think it was originally written in English. I would like to be able to read it, but I can't read it in Dutch. I'm also very curious to hear your opinion on the term "Afropolitanism," which became very fashionable years ago for diasporic Africans. I wrote an article about it in which I question the concept and what people mean when they use it.

**Chika Unigwe:** I have absolutely no idea when *The Black Messiah* is coming out in English. My agent is trying to sell another novel, so we'll see. It will come out whenever we manage to sell it. As to your second question, I know that Taiye Selasi made Afropolitanism when she published her essay "Bye Bye, Babar." What do I think of Afropolitanism? I think that, well, it sounds like a drink, like a cocktail. [laughs] I can understand why that concept is interesting to somebody like Taiye who has no roots. There are people who say that you bury your umbilical cord where you come from. Taiye's umbilical is not buried in Africa and it's very easy for Taiye to claim and enjoy Afropolitanism because Taiye does not feel rooted to anywhere. I don't know if you remember her, she gave a TED Talk some years ago where she talks about "Don't ask my nationality. Ask me where I'm local to." There's a group of diasporic Africans who don't feel at home in Africa, in any country, because they haven't lived there, because they don't go back often enough, because they don't feel rooted to it. Therefore, they feel like Taiye. She feels she has more in common with an African from Liberia who lives in the U.S. and calls New York home. Afropolitanism is not something that I would claim because I feel very rooted to a particular African country. I'm not an Afropolitan. I'm Nigerian, and in that Nigeria, I'm Igbo. Because I can find where my umbilical cord is buried, figuratively, Afropolitanism seems too vague and too borderless for it to be interesting to me, but I understand Taiye's position. I understand her not wanting to be coded in

national of anywhere because she feels like she belongs everywhere; her identity is fluid. She belongs to places rather than to a nation, but that doesn't work for me. What do you think of Afropolitanism?

**Question:** I agree with you. This is what I argued in my article, in fact, that it's more a question of your position, the roots that you have to the place where you are born. At the end of my article, I wondered whether, for example, your children, because they were born in Europe, whether their position could be different. I am aware that the term has been questioned and criticized because of its elitism.

**Chika Unigwe:** Of course, it is very elitist. By its own definition, it is very exclusive. Which is also one of the reasons why I don't find it interesting. My children's father, who is my husband, is Belgian and my kids were raised in Belgium; all but one of them were born there. They feel Belgian. That is the identity that they claim. What I found very frustrating, raising them in Belgium, is that people would always ask them, "Where are you really from?". Because they're biracial, they do not fit into some people's natural understanding of what a Belgian is supposed to be. One of the ironies is that it's only in the States that they can claim their European identity without anybody ever asking, "Where are you *really* from?". They have *never* got that question once. In fact, when my eldest was in high school and some black kid walked up to him and he couldn't do the handshake, the guy was like "Oh, I forgot you're European." There is no question of their Europeanness here in the same way that it is in a place that they consider home. That is one of my most enduring frustrations.

I remember being back in Belgium on holiday three years ago and one of my kids went to church with their grandfather. Some woman walks up to my father-in-law and is like “Who is this?” “My grandson.” “*Ah spreekt hij Nederlands?* Does he speak Dutch?” and my son is like “Yes!” and my father-in-law explains he grew up in Belgium. But this woman would not hear; every time my son spoke Dutch to her, she would respond to my father-in-law in Dutch. Because she could not understand that the words coming out of my son’s mouth were Dutch. Because as far as she was concerned, if you are this colour, you can't speak Dutch. One of the most emotionally violent things to ever happen to me was somebody walking up to my husband in Belgium, where he was with our two boys, and asking “Where did you adopt yours from?”, “Where did you get yours from?”. Or my son coming back when he was in elementary school and asking me, “Am I an *allochtoon* [an allochtonous person], because my teacher says I am?”. And this kid was born in Turnhout and is going to school in Turnhout and his teacher is telling him he's foreign because he looks foreign. It doesn't matter if he has a very Flemish sounding first name and a very Flemish sounding last name. So, I said “No.” “But why does she keep saying that?” I said, “Because she's foolish. She's dumb.” There was another student in class, who was a first-generation immigrant, Vlad, from Poland. My son could understand why the teacher would call Vlad foreign because Vlad's Dutch was very hesitant and Vlad had a very Polish-sounding first name and a very Polish-sounding last name. I guess every time she talks about foreigners in class it would be Stefaan and Vlad, which can be very confusing for a kid. Years later, I met Vlad in Turnhout and I go “Hi, Vlad!”. And Vlad goes to me “Sorry *mevrouw* [*ma'm*], but I'm not Vlad anymore. My name is Toon.” So, Vlad is able to cross that border into *autochtoon* [an autochtonous person] that my children can never cross. Because of their skin colour, there is that barrier. But Vlad who is a first-generation immigrant, all he has to do is to learn Dutch, change his first name, adopt his stepfather's

last name, and nobody asks Vlad “Where are you from?”. I've sort of gone off on a tangent.  
[Laughs]

**Elisabeth Bekers:** I just want to add to that. I think that would be a warm plea to apply what Andrea Levy said in a British context “If Englishness does not define me, then please redefine Englishness.” This is also something that we need to do. We need to step away from our mental images of certain identities and look more for the diversity within that.

**Chika Unigwe:** Absolutely! Which is why I find the irony fascinating that my children had to leave Belgium, come to the States, to become accepted as Europeans. Now that one of my kids is in school in Belgium, he is at the University of Ghent, and there he tells me that they call him African American. Having to constantly define your identity in the place that you call home is kind of frustrating.

**Question:** I am wondering about the selection of first- and third-person narrators. Is that a conscious decision? We've discussed it at some length, as some of the stories are in first person and others not.

**Chika Unigwe:** I think that all these choices sort of happen at a point when I'm writing. If the voice doesn't sound right, then I change it. I don't want to sound cheesy or anything, but the characters sort of choose in what voice they are written. Sometimes I start in the first person and then I feel it isn't working. This character really wants me to tell this story in a different voice. So, I let the characters choose what voice they want to be written in.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** I want to thank you so much for having taken the time to answer our questions and visit our class long distance. And thank you so much for your writing! We look forward to that next novel that you mentioned! Fingers crossed that it will appear very soon.

**Chika Unigwe:** Thank you very much. It was lovely. Thanks for all your really thoughtful, kind comments and questions. I appreciated this. Thank you for teaching and reading my work, and for engaging with my work and for giving me new insights into the work.

## Works Cited

- Bastida-Rodríguez, Patricia and Bekers, Elisabeth. "Writing an(Other) Europe: Challenging peripheries in Chika Unigwe's fiction on Belgium." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2021, pp. 386-400.
- Feldner, Maximilian. *Narrating the New African Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.



# Journal for Literary & Intermedial Crossings

