Experimental Literature and Intermedial Relations

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Introduction:

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Experimental writing is often defined as a deviation from generic norms, as formal excess, difficulty, or refusal; the essays gathered in this special issue suggest that experimental writing's departure from literary conventions is inextricably bound up with an interrogation of its intermedial and cross-cultural relations. As Nassim Winnie Balestrini has recently suggested, focusing on the genre of the novel in particular, "intermedial novels question traditional views of the possibilities of the novel by challenging how readers process media-specific communication and how readers translate form and content into meaning" (68). This issue builds on recent scholarship which has increasingly foregrounded intermediality as a key framework for understanding experimental literary practices, particularly in contexts where literature intersects with visual, digital, and performative media (Bruhn; López-Varela Azcárate). Yet, as Marina Grishakova has pointed out, "intermediality has always been and still is an incentive for experimentation with new materials, perceptions and cultural forms and extension of their perceptual, aesthetic, and social effects" (14). The texts examined in this special issue foreground writing as an encounter between media, whether through engagements with visual art, performance, technology or documentary materials. The lens of intermediality, understood as a critical reflection on mediation itself, investigates the ways in which literary experiment unsettles the separations between modes of representation. Intermediality does not only refer to the coexistence of different media within a single work but also to the complex relations that emerge when media intersect and reshape each other's formal possibilities (Rippl 3). Literary experiment, then, is the site where these boundaries between media are made critically negotiable.

This special issue brings together analyses of U.S.-American experimental works across a range of genres—including novels, a play, essays, and a book-length poetry collection—spanning the period from 1965 to the present, and concludes with an interview with contemporary experimental British poet Paul Stephenson. The temporal arc of these contributions coincides with the consolidation and expansion of intermediality as a field of study, from early theoretical formulations in the late twentieth century to its current engagement with digital and multimodal cultural forms. Yet the works examined here largely operate within the textual framework of the book or the dramatic script, foregrounding the page as their primary material support. Revisiting these works today allows us to reassess how experimentation within ostensibly "single-media" forms already mobilizes intermedial logics: through the remediation of other arts, the staging of

performance within text, and the incorporation of visual, spatial, or cross-cultural references. In doing so, the issue highlights how such works anticipate many of the questions that animate contemporary intermediality studies, demonstrating the continued relevance of textual experimentation for thinking about the shifting boundaries between media.

In **Steven Forbes**'s contribution "'Cubistic Time' and Phenomenology in William Demby's *The Catacombs,*" Cubism is more than a metaphor for fragmentation. Drawing on existential phenomenology, Forbes demonstrates how Demby's novel translates principles associated with modernist painting such as simultaneity and collage into narrative form. "Cubistic time" thus emerges as an intermedial construct: a reworking of phenomenology and art theory, which Forbes traces back to Michael Bakhtin and Peter Bürger, within the temporal structures of the novel. The text's metanarrative strategies and documentary materials create a compositional logic close to collage. By uncovering the theoretical foundations of Demby's novel, Forbes's article contributes to the recovery of this novel, still relatively unknown in both U.S. American and Black studies.

A different negotiation between media is the topic of **Joule Zeng Wang**'s discussion of David Wojnarowicz's memoir *Close to the Knives* (1991) and his tape journals in their article, "'In These Moments I Hate Language': Reading David Wojnarowicz's Typewriter and Tape Recorder". As an artist working across visual art, performance, and writing, Wojnarowicz exposes the limits of language. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, who posits that the subject is constituted within and constrained by pre-existing linguistic structures, Wang reads Wojnarowicz's apparent rejection of language not as a refusal of language itself, but of its ideological uses. Instead, Wojnarowicz's work mobilises language through intensity and violence to contest dominant discourses. Wang frames Wojnarocwicz's typewriter and tape recorder as material sites where body, unconscious processes, and politics intersect. Here, literary experimentation is inseparable from technological mediation.

Questions of embodiment and mediation take a different form in **Eline Cremers**'s "Reading the Body as the Site of Dreams/Dreaming/Dreamers in Kathy Acker's Work". Focusing on Acker's engagement with dreams across her oeuvre, the article argues that the body functions simultaneously as agent and product of inscription, troubling the distinction between dream and reality. Drawing on feminist theorists of embodiment by e.g. Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz, Julia Kristeva, and Mckenzie Wark, Cremers shows how Acker's incorporation of dreams produces a form of textuality in which the body itself becomes a form of textual mediation. Thus, Cremers reads the abortion in Acker's novel *Don Quixote* (1986) as a challenge to the patriarchal mind/body binary, momentarily opening up other gendered identifications. However, this transgression remains constrained by phallogocentric structures and the material limits of the body, as illness reasserts embodiment. Ultimately, Acker's protagonist turns to dream and madness to reimagine these limits, consistently blurring the boundaries between body, identity, and reality.

In **Kerry-Jane Wallart**'s article "Cross-cultural Drama, Tragic Anomalies, and Queered Spaces: The Case of Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995)", the focus shifts to the medium of theatre and to the cross-cultural dimensions present in Moraga's re-writing of the Greek myth of *Medea*. Examining how theatrical form is mobilised as a site of cross-cultural and aesthetic disruption, it puts forward a reading of Morago's play as an experimental re-writing which brings together heterogeneous cultural and dramatic codes, producing what it describes as "anomalies" that resist stable interpretation. In this sense, Moraga's dramaturgy foregrounds performative experience as a mode of knowledge production, collapsing inherited discourses—classical tragedy, feminist critique, and Chicana cultural expression—into a hybrid theatrical space. The play's ambiguous structures, shifting cultural references, and queered spatial imaginaries thus exemplify how experimental theatre can function intermedially, staging encounters between traditions, genres, and epistemologies.

Ege A. Özbek's article "Intermedial Resistance: The Politics and Poetics of Genre and Intermediality in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)" examines Rankine's book-length lyric essay through what the author terms "intermedial sentimentality": a mode in which textual and visual forms intermingle to create an affective representation which lays bare the lived experience of systemic anti-Black racism. Building on work by Irina Rajewsky on the concept of the media border, as well as Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of the sentimental, the article examines in what ways *Citizen* constructs a sentimental space of resistance in which affect is read as inherently political in its linking of private experience to collective critique.

The final contribution to this special issue is an interview conducted by Hannah Van Hove with poet **Paul Stephenson** entitled "On the Act and Forms of Writing Grief: Paul Stephenson in Conversation about *Hard Drive*". In his debut collection *Hard Drive* (2023), shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry 2024, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through affectionate, humorous, and formally adventurous poems. In this conversation, Stephenson shares his thoughts on the experimental strategies used in his poetry, reflecting on the act and forms of writing grief. The discussion also explores intermedial influences, from Jackson Pollock's paintings to the integration of documentary material, alongside a playful engagement with visual form. In the two poetry recordings included here, the interplay between spoken word, musicality, and the text on the page is brought into sharp focus.

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this special issue suggest that experimental writing does not simply incorporate the nonverbal; it reveals literature's entanglement with other media and, in doing so, reframes how we understand literary experiment too. Read in the contemporary moment in which intermediality is often focused on as a phenomenon concerned with technologically hybrid or overtly multimedia works, the contributions gathered here allow us to (re)consider how intermedial experimentation

unfolds within the textual space of the page. Through the remediation of visual, performative, and cultural forms, the works examined in this issue test the limits of literary expression while foregrounding the porous boundaries between media. Read from the vantage point of contemporary intermediality studies, these texts appear not only as formal innovations of their respective moments but also as explorations of literature's ongoing dialogue with other artistic and cultural practices. In this sense, they invite us to reconsider experimental writing as a site where media relations are continually negotiated, and where the literary text becomes a dynamic space for thinking across forms, genres, and sensory regimes.

Acknowledgements

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"Cubistic Time" and Phenomenology in William Demby's *The Catacombs*

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This article explores the theory of "cubistic time" in William Demby's *The Catacombs* (1965), arguing that Demby uses Cubism and existential phenomenology to show how simultaneous perspectives are presented in the novel, and how these ostensibly disparate viewpoints are arranged in "collage" form as part of a coherent whole. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories, it illustrates how this fusion of modern art theory and philosophy comes together and functions in Demby's novel. The use of metanarrative and apparently real newspaper reports in the novel creates a "jigsaw puzzle" effect in which the reader has to piece together the different fragments of information, which can be interpreted through theories found in phenomenology and Cubism itself. While none of the scarce criticism on Demby's novel to date explicitly mentions metanarrative or phenomenology, this article argues that there is clear evidence of both. Drawing on work by Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Bürger, this article further shows how narratological and modern art theories, which are linked to ideas found in phenomenology, are present in Demby's work. In *The Catacombs*, clear parallels can be determined between what Demby describes as "Cubistic time," phenomenology, and metanarrative through his use of different perspectives and fractured, non-linear time. Overall, this article sheds light on the intricate and sophisticated narrative technique used in *The Catacombs* and fully explores what Demby means by "Cubistic time."

Keywords: cubism, phenomenology, time, simultaneity, metanarrative

Published in 1965, William Demby's second novel, *The Catacombs,* received some encouraging reviews, but it soon fell into obscurity and is still relatively unknown among African American literature scholars today. However, upon its publication, some critics also seemed "baffled by its non-conformity" (Jaskoski 181) while others gave it a "cool reception" (Berry 442), and some reviewers accused it of "[lacking] clarity and cohesion." (Marzioli 417) This is no doubt partly due to the narrative in *The Catacombs* being frequently interspersed with newspaper reports on minor and major happenings of the time. The timeframe of the narrative could be described as non-linear, for while it ostensibly takes the form of a journal, covering a span of two years, Demby clearly manipulates time to the extent that the actual present time in which the narrative takes place often seems uncertain. At first, *The Catacombs* appears to the reader as a novel of chaos and spontaneity; many chapters and passages begin with Demby simply stating what the date and time are, then going on to describe things like the weather or how busy Rome is at the time of writing. Elsewhere, he begins his narrative with one or more news headlines from that day's newspapers, sometimes followed by a short summary of

a news report.[1] Furthermore, these news reports also occasionally appear in the middle of a conversation, or at the end of a chapter, without any apparent reason for their inclusion.

The Catacombs is centred around the main character of Bill Demby, who is writing the novel that we are reading. The novel is mostly set in Rome, where Demby was living at the time of writing, with some minor parts taking place in New York City and Washington D.C. There are two other notable characters in the novel—an African American dancer named Doris, who is the daughter of a woman Demby knew in college, and a married Italian Count named Raffaele, who is having an affair with Doris. However, Demby, who is also married, is having an affair with Doris at the same time without the Count's knowledge. Later, Doris discovers she is pregnant but does not know who the father is. The other characters in the novel are never fully developed, with the clearly fictional characters connected to the fictional world of the Count and Doris, and the apparently *real* characters related to or acquainted with Demby. The novel ends mysteriously when Doris enters the Catacombs and disappears, leaving the Count alone. The majority of the novel is written in the form of a metanarrative, as Demby reflects upon the writing process while the novel unfolds. One example of Demby's use of metanarrative is when, in the middle of the third chapter of the novel, the narrator, Bill Demby, states that, "I tell P. that I am writing a novel and that we are discussing how it should end, and that this conversation about how the novel shall end is the central theme to the third chapter." (39) Demby does not say exactly who P. and Alice are, but they are most likely references to people whom William Demby, the author, is friends with in his everyday life outside that of the fictional world of the novel. Demby, namely, reads in *Il Giorno* that morning that "P., who has been accused of trying to hold up a gas station in Latina, has offered to take 'truth serum' and undergo questioning" by far-right journalists who have been mercilessly criticising him. (38) This encounter with P. and Alice appears to be taken from a factual occurrence which transpired in the author William Demby's life while he was writing the novel, and has now been included as part of the fictional narrative because the characters do not appear in the same storyline that features either the Count or Doris anywhere in the narrative. During the meeting with P. and Alice in the third chapter of the novel, Demby continues:

> At once P. is interested: I think he already has heard of the novel, because at the Writers' Congress in Florence I talked about it freely with anyone who was willing to listen. One novelist even began to criticize the novel as though it had already been written, which is perfectly in harmony with the theory of cubistic time I am so recklessly fooling around with. (39–40)

The suggestion that the conversation about how the novel "should end" is the "central theme" of the chapter we are reading, although we are only halfway through the chapter itself, implies uncertainty during the creative process of writing the novel and

[1] These appear to be taken from actual newspaper reports published on the dates given, with Italian news reports translated by Demby himself.

forces the reader to interpret the "plot" of the novel from different stages of its creation. Here we have a type of metafictional narrative, where the narrator draws the reader's attention to the fact that they are in the process of reading a work of fiction, and he does so by ironically highlighting the fictionality of the characters, including the narrator himself, who are an essential part of the plot of the novel while it is being read. Patricia Waugh notes that characters in metafictional novels not only play roles, but they also "'fictionalize' in terms of the *content* of the plot; they too are 'fictionalized,' created, through the *formal construction* of the plot." (53) However, in *The Catacombs,* the "plot" is centred around the news reports, and so what makes up the "plot" of the novel is yet undecided, as Demby himself claimed in an interview: "This is a spooky novel because you would think that I am the author of much of this, but no, much of what *The Catacombs* is, is reporting." (Micconi 136) Furthermore, Demby also informs us that a novelist criticises the novel even though it has not been written yet. This kind of meta-narrating, which Demby claims is in tune with his theory of "cubistic time," involves different perspectives from different time periods. The reader is being invited to not only consider the novel as a whole at different points in the storyline, but also view it from the perspectives of different characters—in this case, not just Demby's but also those of his two friends and the unnamed novelist. Melanie Masterton Sherazi et al., writing in 2022, argue that, "*The Catacombs* is indeed an original, unconventional, and at times confounding piece of writing—openly ambitious in its structure and certainly nonrealistic in terms of its provocative use of a nonlinear narrative and abrupt time shifts." (113)

So, what exactly does Demby mean by what he calls "cubistic time"? Having studied art history at the University of Rome before writing *The Catacombs* (Bone 128; Marzioli 417), it is unlikely that this comment by Demby was used casually. Edward Margolies, commenting on the idiosyncratic use of narratives in the novel, and the apparent spontaneity of their inclusion, tells us that, "This simultaneity of presentation is presumably what Demby means when he speaks somewhere of 'cubistic time.'" (183) Earlier in the same essay, Margolies rightly mentions the "collage effect" (182) of the novel—which was a style favoured by Cubist painters—but he fails to penetrate the full meaning of what Demby is alluding to, only partially recognising his metanarratological style (without explicitly naming it as such) and the time aspect of the theory without really dissecting the full meaning of Demby's theory of "cubistic time." Similarly, James C. Hall, when trying to tackle the meaning behind the theory, identifies the uncertainty of who is real and who is fictitious in the novel and at which moment in time they are speaking from:

> We are never sure whether or not Doris's relationship with the count takes place at a different level from that of the 'Bill Demby' addressing the reader. We do not know whether the Doris who is a character in Bill Demby's book is somehow different from the Doris who has a relationship with Bill Demby. Nor, for that matter, do we know how, as readers, to differentiate between William Demby (the name on our text which indicates authorship) and Bill Demby, who seems to exist as a character in a book who is trying to write a book. (105)

After such searching questions, Hall eventually gives up elaborating on the theory of cubistic time by merely concluding that, "The complicated structure of a novel being written within a novel allows for interesting kinds of reflexivity." (105)

The confusion surrounding the ambivalent time placement of the characters alluded to by Hall is discernible in the following passage by Demby, where he addresses the reader in the second person, speaking to his imagined, soon-to-be audience:

> Now I shall be truthful. But then you people will say that this is not Fiction, you PEOPLE will ask: 'Where are the REAL CHARACTERS?' Well, as a starter, what about me, the Author? I mean, 'Ain't I every bit as interesting as Doris or the Count?' Oh, but you are not a *fictional* character! (emphasis in original 96)

Hall justifiably questions the lack of clarity concerning who is speaking and from what unspecified time frame in the novel they are speaking from, and whether the characters Demby sometimes refers to (including himself, Bill/William Demby) are real or fictitious. Nevertheless, the novel clearly subverts linear time from the beginning of the entire narrative. The existential sensation of contemporaneity that Demby's narrative style imbues gives the reader the impression that they are part of the creative process of reading the novel while it is being written, and this is aided by the more grounded newspaper reports and seemingly real personal occurrences in Demby's life, which, in turn, create an effect of spatiotemporal uncertainty on the reader. This kind of narrative technique is what Mikhail Bakhtin sees as a type of "*chronotope* (literally 'time space')" which is used to describe the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature […] it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)." (84) Jay R. Berry goes a little further when attempting to expound upon Demby's cubistic time theory by arguing that:

> Clearly his knowledge and appreciation of the cubist theory of painting is illustrated throughout the novel. His concern for the non-representational depiction of reality (i.e., reality as viewed from a number of perspectives simultaneously, just as a cubist painting presents a multifaceted view of its subject) and for nonlinear time has its artistic roots in cubism. (441)

Here, Berry has hit upon a key aspect of Demby's theory of Cubistic time: perspective. Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten argue that the Cubist painters favoured the "notion of 'simultaneity,' wherein many different moments could be depicted in a single painting." (71) This sense of simultaneity, as mentioned by Margolies and Berry, is evident throughout the novel, especially so concerning the fragmented use of non-linear time; but this arguably stems from more than one perspective. These perspectives are also not, as Hall suggested, from one or more real or fictitious perspectives, because what we encounter throughout the novel are informative news reports, which are not from the perspective of any character, fictitious or otherwise, but are in fact based on true happenings or

reports.[2] This kind of polyphonous narrative might be described as a kind of "heteroglossia," as Bakhtin calls it, which is a "way of conceiving the world as made up of a rolling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers." (Holquist 69) According to Bakhtin,

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [*raznorećie*] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorećie*] can enter the novel. (263)

This conglomeration of voices, perspectives, and timeframes in *The Catacombs* is in some respects undeniably redolent of the philosophical theory of phenomenology, although no scholars to date have explicitly linked Demby's theory of Cubistic time to this school of philosophy. Despite the two being separate movements in philosophy and art, Cubism and phenomenology are, indeed, not as disparate as they might at first seem. For, as Edward F. Fry surmised in 1966 in his monograph, *Cubism*: "The relation to Picasso's and Brasque's 1913–14 cubism to the experiential world very closely parallels the method of so-called eidetic reduction in the phenomenology of Husserl." (39) Phenomenology, like Cubism, is largely concerned with perspectives and time, and this is something that Nathan A. Scott Jr. recognised in *The Catacombs*:

> We are constantly being shuttled back and forth between the present and the past, between one place and another, between events involving major principals of the action and various public happenings. Everything is envisaged as dovetailing into everything else, the whole of reality being engulfed in the stream of interrelation. (xiv)

It must be pointed out, however, that phenomenology is not an easy philosophical concept to pin down. Merleau-Ponty describes it as "the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception and the essence of consciousness," (*Phenomenology of Perception* xx), whereas John Macquarrie believes that:

> The point of phenomenology is that it offers a description of depth, so to speak, causing us to notice features that we ordinarily fail to notice, removing hindrances that stand in our way of our seeing, exhibiting the essential rather than the accidental, showing interrelations that may lead to a different view from the one that we get when a phenomenon is considered in isolation. (24)

However, this explanation of phenomenology by Macquarrie suggests that we suspend our general understanding of how we generally decipher the world around us, and this could be interpreted as a definition of what is termed "pure phenomenology," as Husserl envisioned it, which intended "to locate the absolutely bare, presuppositionless data on

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[2] It could be argued that there are many different voices in the news reports as they are written by news reporters or journalists, but we are never told who writes the articles, only the newspapers they appear in.

which to build the whole of knowledge." (Nakhnikian xv) However, this type of phenomenology is almost unattainable, and as David Cooper rightly tells us, "Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are unanimous that this programme of 'pure' phenomenology is impossible. One can neither doubt, nor seriously pretend to doubt, the reality of the world." (5) Therefore, in order to make sense of Demby's theory of cubistic time, the existential phenomenology propounded by Merleau-Ponty can be utilised as a more effective theoretical tool to understand more clearly what Demby is trying to convey, rather than Husserl's "pure phenomenology."

Throughout *The Catacombs*, the narrative undoubtedly creates a sense of disorder and spontaneity, which led to some early critics such as Peter Buitenhuis to remark that, "proportion, progression, rhythm […] must be ordered and adjusted so that the chaos we call life is given some new meaning." (qtd. in Berry 442) What Buitenhuis fails to understand here is that the reader's role in interpreting the novel, in whatever way they perceive it, is a crucial part of their exegesis of the novel, just like our own experiential viewing of a painting is integral to interpreting its meaning. In his essay, "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty informs us that,

> Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, between order and chaos. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation. (*Sense and Non-Sense* 13)

Cézanne, who had a huge influence on many Cubist painters, wanted people viewing his work to be part of the process of what was happening on the canvas; he wanted people to feel like they were taking part in something that transcended an ordinary two-dimensional image; or, as he himself once said: "Painting […] means perceiving harmony between numerous relationships and transposing them according to a new, original logic." (qtd. in Hoog 3) When applied to literature, this is very similar to what Demby manages to achieve in his novel; he wants the reader to feel like they are taking part in the writing process as it is being written, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Like a painting, a novel expresses itself tacitly. Its subject, like that of a painting, can be related." (*Signs* 76) It is surely no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty, one of the most prominent existential phenomenologists of his time, decided to choose Cézanne's art as the focal point of his phenomenological investigations into the nature of art and philosophy.

Like Cézanne, Demby's intention to depict the "birth of order through spontaneous organisation" is evident in the various news reports and seemingly unrelated events narrated in the novel which resemble what Buitenhuis refers to as "the chaos we call life" (442); they are small pieces of a larger jigsaw which we must interpret in order to deduce a broader meaning of what the novel is trying to portray, which is a multitude of narrative voices intertwined with the metanarrative of Demby's voice to create a "collage" effect which can be understood heterogeneously. Furthermore, art historian Barbara Drudi has argued that, "Demby found a poetic antecedent of that concept of simultaneity of events in the chronicity that Braque and Picasso had investigated in

painting." (152) In his introduction to the 1991 edition of the novel, Nathan A. Scott Jr. also compares *The Catacombs* to the experience of viewing a Cubist painting:

> Demby's narrative procedure might be said to be an affair at once of cubism and of *pointillisme*. Picasso, in a great work of 1912, 'Violin,' simply presents this musical instrument on his canvas, but the edges of the planes making up this object are so rearranged as to make it appear that the planes are intersecting and are superimposed upon and interpenetrating one another, and thus this classic of cubist painting has the effect of making us feel that we are simultaneously viewing the violin from every possible angle. Now it is such an experience of *simultanéité* that *The Catacombs* is seeking to call forth. (xii–xiv)

As Scott points out, Demby invites us to perceive many different things not just simultaneously, but also *existentially*, or in an existentially phenomenological sense, and this is something that Cubist painters such as Picasso were trying to achieve in their art. The notion that Demby strives to create a narrative presenting us with different perspectives simultaneously in a literary work in a similar way to how this was achieved by the Cubist painters in their paintings is a view that is shared by Drudi, who tells us that,

> The great Cubist idea was that in a painting, the subject could be represented simultaneously from multiple points of view. Though more theoretical than real, such a notion so intrigued Demby that in writing *The Catacombs* he tried repeatedly to achieve the same effect of coincidence between space and time. (152)

Moreover, Edward F. Fry has commented that, "Objects in the paintings of Cézanne assume a 'distorted,' non-perspectival form as a result of multiple perceptions from discrete points of view, accumulated and then expressed in a single composite shape." (37) It is also unsurprising then, that Merleau-Ponty saw parallels with phenomenology and Cubism because they both investigate perspectival biases in order to extrapolate fuller meanings and envisage truer perspectives. Concerning perspective in art and literature, Merleau-Ponty tells us that,

> What is hazardous in literary communication, and ambiguous and irreducible to the theme in all the great works of art, is not a provisional weakness which we might hope to overcome. It is the price we must pay to have a literature, that is, a conquering language which introduces us to unfamiliar perspectives instead of confirming in us our own. (*Signs* 77)

Demby's narrative does indeed present us with multiple perspectives, both of which concern historical and philosophical time. One of the perspectives in *The Catacombs* is the reporting of what is happening in the US via several US and Italian news sources, which are then translated into English by Demby, fictional or otherwise, from (usually) his home in Rome. Another, quite bizarre, perspective is when Demby invites Doris and the Count round to his house to watch him appear on a television show:

> Today is May 12. Doris and the Count are here to watch the TV program *Il Signore delle 21: Harlem*, in which I appear as a kind of assistant master of ceremonies, together with Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis, Hazel Scott, the Peters Sisters and many other stars of the Negro entertainment world. (49)

Here, Demby invites the reader to imagine the fictional Demby watching himself on television while he is sitting beside two fictional characters, who are also watching the show, while he is writing the novel we are reading. This passage, at first, seems to be paradoxical, even from a metanarratological perspective, because, although we know that the people he names on the show were definitely real people, he is narrating a scene where fictional characters are watching images from reality along with a version of Demby, who is also fictional, featuring the real William Demby on the screen. However, William Demby later confirmed that he *did* actually appear on the show, presumably on the date specified:

> Yes, I was there! They called me in at the last minute to be assistant Manager of Ceremonies. People didn't know who those Jazz musicians were; Jazz was known among the elite but not by the general TV audience, so the producers of the show begged me to come to introduce these Jazz musicians to the Italian public. (Micconi 134)

Here, Demby replaces his real self with his fictional self on the show, *and* his real self, who is watching the TV show in the novel, furthering the metafictional perspectives between time, fact, and fiction.

As far as perspectives go, Demby appears to make an explicit reference to the kind of differing perspectives found in Cubism when he relays a news report from an Italian newspaper with the headline, "'NEW LOOK FOR THE PIETÀ.' Vatican City, Oct. 22 (AP)," (90) regarding the new placement of Michelangelo's "Pietà" in Vatican City:

> Michelangelo's "Pietà," one of the outstanding art treasures of the Vatican, has been shifted to give viewers a better look. It's the sixth time the statue, placed in St. Peter's in 1499, has been moved. Vatican art experts say this time the position will be closer to the one Michelangelo himself had in mind […] Redig de Campos, a Catholic priest and art scholar, said in the Vatican newspaper *Observatore Romano* yesterday that the way the statue had been placed before was an "outrage" to Michelangelo's design. He said Michelangelo had wanted the figure of Mary leaning slightly to the left, whereas the old placing made the figure almost vertical. The "Pietà" had been moved off its old pedestal in the chapel and placed at about four feet lower, brought about three feet forward from the chapel wall and inclined slightly toward the viewer. (90–91)

Here, a famous sculpture by Michelangelo is shown to be problematic because there are disagreements on where it should be placed to achieve the "correct" perspective by the beholder. This to-ing and fro-ing of the placement of the statue is a reminder that Renaissance art cannot do what Cubism can, which is to present the beholder with various perspectives simultaneously. According to Antiff and Leighten, the Cubists rejected the "Renaissance perspective in favour of 'multiple views' expressive of the painter's cerebral response to 'tactile' and 'motor' space as well as 'visual' space." (74–75) At another point in the novel, Demby explains that he wrote an introduction for the exhibition of a young Roman artist, and he tells us that,

> Inanimate objects, be they tables or chairs, typewriters or pillows, Michelangelo's "Pietà," are formed of invisible universes of matter and energy: in this sense they are alive. Enclosed in a

> room, church or museum, house or castle, they influence one another – condition one another's existence (just as the "animate objects," the human members of a family, influence one another's existence, in a house or in a castle). (92)

Here, Demby might be speaking about the different objects found in a painting and how the qualities of each object influence each other to form a whole. This passage is reminiscent of the theory of phenomenology as propounded by Merleau-Ponty when he states that, "If a patient sees the devil, he also sees his odor, his flames, and his smoke, because the meaningful unity 'devil' is just this acrid, sulfurous, and burning essence. In the thing, there is a sensible quality to the others." (*Phenomenology of Perception* 333) Like this description of "the devil," the objects Demby speaks of, inanimate or animate, each have their own distinct features, which influence each other as seemingly discrete qualities when viewed individually in a different setting. However, these features actually appear to be inherently *connected* when viewed as a whole when they are enclosed in a certain setting, such as a room or a house. We do not automatically think of the devil when we think of "flames" and "smoke," but when experienced as part of a whole, in this case "the devil," we then experience these impressions as qualities that are related to a central theme or entity, each one contributing to the larger whole. The use of different perspectives and the role that different qualities play in the overall "whole" is something that influenced Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein. Commenting on how she was influenced by Cézanne, she once said that he "'conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously.'" (qtd. in Antliff and Leighten 105) The apparently disparate parts of Demby's narrative all link together to form a "whole," similar to the effect Cézanne achieved in his paintings, as explained by Stein. But, like the tables and chairs, etc. that Demby speaks of, the different parts of his narrative can also be understood independently, while, at the same time, they also form a smaller part of the overall artistic impression that Demby is trying to achieve in his novel.

Arguably, *The Catacombs* resembles the form of a montage, which "presupposes the fragmentation of reality and describes the phase of the constitution of the work." (Bürger 73) Indeed, as Peter Bürger further postulates,

> The organic work of art is constructed according to the syntagmatic pattern; individual parts and the whole form a dialectical unity. An adequate reading is described by the hermeneutic circle: the parts can be understood only through the whole, the whole only through the parts. This means that an anticipating comprehension of the whole guides, and is simultaneously corrected by, the comprehension of the parts. (79–80)

Later in the novel, Bill Demby visits Doris at her new apartment after returning from a trip to the US, and throughout the conversation between the two of them, there are what at first seem to be random news headlines and parts of news reports interpolated into the text between paragraphs of dialogue. Doris tells Bill that, "You're not thinking about your novel, you're not thinking about me …" (186), and this is closely followed by,

> ("*Paese Sera*. Tuesday, January 21, 1964: FIERCE CRIME IN VIA LAZIO … VICINITY OF VIA VENETO … EGYPTIAN ASSASSINATED WITH FOUR PISTOL SHOTS – The victim is the *commerciante* Faruk Chourbagi (age 27) … He was probably killed Saturday evening, in the office of Tricotex: the assassin threw acid in his face and then fired four shots at him face to face ... The palazzo of the crime is only a few meters from the building where Christine Wanniger was slain …") (186)

Immediately following this, Demby reflects on the notion of rational will and the nature of evil, and then the narrative goes back to the conversation with Doris still speaking. The news report seems to confirm what Doris has said preceding it—that Demby is not thinking about her or the novel. However, later in the conversation another headline appears which is dated from three days later, and, after further dialogue from Doris, there is what looks like an entry from a dictionary or science book: "('*Vitriol*. late ME.L. *vitriolum*. f.L. *vitrum* glass. One or another of various native or artificial sulphates of metals used in the arts or medicinally, esp. sulphate of iron ...')" (191) At first glance, this seems to be completely unconnected to anything that has preceded it, until the following paragraph gives us another headline:

> (*Paese Sera*, Friday, January 24, 1964: "THE VITRIOL FOR THE LAW IS AN AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCE – The vitriol has returned to public attention. Used, particularly, with the mentality typical of the vendetta, to symbolize, perhaps, the absolute contempt for the person to be punished [...] The vitriol has returned to public attention five days ago, when the ferocious – it has been noted that it is mainly women who use this extremely dangerous substance – murderer, after having repeatedly shot the Egyptian industrialist Faruk Chourbagi in the face, threw, as a gesture of supreme contempt, a jet of the corrosive acid at the face of the young man, to disfigure it ...") (191)

We now get a better idea of where Demby was going when he gave the description of vitriol, but it seems strange that he should insert headlines and news stories which are three days apart in the middle of Doris speaking about the child she is expecting and her conversation with the Count as to what to name the baby.

Or does it? The news story is a real story, taken from the January 24, 1964, publication of *Paesa Sera,* which involved the murder of a young man who was having an affair with another man's wife, and later they were both arrested on suspicion of murder in a court case that was sensationalised in the Italian press at the time. The murder is centred around some kind of love triangle, not too different from the one in the novel between Doris, the Count and Demby, except that theirs is now centred around the pregnancy of the woman involved (Doris) who is unsure who the father is and is worried about what colour the baby's skin will be when it is born (hence, the anxiety over unexpected appearances). Doris' constant worrying about what the baby will look like and the reaction of the Count when he sees the baby is linked to the deliberate disfigurement of the murder victim (compared to the reaction of his wife when seeing her lover's disfigured face), while the murder itself is re-enacted later in the novel when Demby dissolves Doris' character out of the novel when she re-enters the Catacombs with the Count and subsequently disappears. Doris also alludes to the murder when she tells Demby that, "Giving birth to whatever it was you mean by the 'third thing,' using the

manly weapon of dialogue, instead of the old womanly weapon of poison and the bargain-basement gun." (emphasis in original 190–91) Here, the writing process of the dialogue between Bill and Doris appears to be taking shape through the influence of the news reports, especially so considering the comment Demby makes shortly before the description of vitriol: "The world's maybe crazy. No one wants birth any more. Everybody's afraid of the Event." (190) Here we can begin to put together an abstract picture of what is driving the narrative and see how the ostensibly disconnectedness of the narrative fits together with the other parts to give further meaning to the text. This gives an insight into how the news reports are not only influencing the "plot," but are actually an integral part of the "plot" itself, and how Demby uses these reports as metafictional devices to shape the narrative of the novel as it is being written. Different subjective and apparently objective perspectives are presented to the reader through the dialogue between Bill and Doris, the news reports, and the description of the chemical used in the attack. Moreover, the gap between the dates of the news reports tells us that even though the conversation is supposed to be taking place one day at a certain moment in time, the narrative is actually fragmented because the writing process has stopped to allow for external matters occurring in the real world to influence its design.

The news reports in *The Catacombs* are not the only influence on the writing process of the novel, however, and certain factors from Demby's own artistic leanings and experiences from his day-to-day life play a part in making the novel flow. According to Merleau-Ponty, a successful novel does not consist,

> in a succession of ideas or theses but would have the same kind of existence as an object of the senses or a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm and which leaves in the memory not a set of ideas but rather the emblem and the monogram of those ideas. (*The World of Perception* 101)

Throughout the novel, Demby's "monogram" of ideas can be discerned by interpreting the parts as a whole with a sense of "temporal progression," which should not be adhered to in a linear sense, but instead with a keen awareness of the multiple perspectives presented to us and the undeniable influence of outside factors involved in the writing process. *The Catacombs* does indeed read like a "thing in motion," and in it, there can be detected an almost filmic aspect to its style as well as its artistic slant, which is unsurprising considering Demby worked with some of the most influential Italian filmmakers of the 1960s, including Federico Fellini and Roberto Rossellini.[3] Arguably, *The Catacombs* does function as a type of "documentary novel," given its cuts and jumps from acted-out scenes to reporting and Bill Demby's first-person narrative. The idea that

[3] Although Demby translated, co-wrote and acted in various films in Italy during his time in Rome, his most notable role is when he served as Assistant Director to Roberto Rossellini in the film, *Europa '51* (1952), which starred Ingrid Bergman. Furthermore, Melanie Masterton Sherazi informs us that, "with *The Catacombs,* Demby trailblazes a late modernist aesthetic that was indelibly informed by his interactions and collaborations in Rome with *avant-garde* Italian artists and leftist filmmakers" (69; for a more detailed analysis of the influence of Italian filmmakers on Demby's writing in *The Catacombs,* see also Berry 440–41).

the novel has documentary-style elements in it is something that Barbara Foley also supports:

> In *The Catacombs* the documentary mode becomes so convoluted that the artist's status as 'maker' comes supremely to the fore; the question of historicity or fraudulence becomes virtually irrelevant, since the object of imitation is clearly a potential text rather than a potential sequence of events in the world, and the endless mirrors of narrative reflexivity are more central to the author's design than are any persons or occurrences that might be reflected in those mirrors. (399)

Here, Foley insists that the various perspectives in the novel are merely reflections of Demby's own consciousness and are imitations of different narratological viewpoints which Demby has created in order to achieve his artistic "design." Although there may be some truth to this statement, it is nevertheless also true that Demby fuses what appear to be objective "truths" taken from the various news reports with subjective perspectives from the various characters in the novel in order to derive some form of overall meaning. What Foley fails to consider, though, is that Demby also positions himself phenomenologically from the perspectives of one of his fictional characters. "Phenomenology's most important accomplishment is, it would seem," Merleau-Ponty tells us,

> to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism though its concept of the world […] The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [*la reprise*] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, xxxiv)

Demby's theory of Cubistic time, therefore, must be understood in phenomenological as well as Cubistic terms. However, for a more accurate understanding of the novel's narrative technique overall, metafictional theory also provides additional insights into the meanings that Demby is trying to convey through his style of writing. Although alluded to indirectly by critics, metafiction or metanarrative, like phenomenology, is never explicitly referred to in critical analyses of *The Catacombs.* Waugh describes metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," and that metafictional writing "explore[s] the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." (2) As previously noted, Demby certainly blurs the lines between fictional and factual, although it appears that only the factual influences the fictional and not vice-versa. "Cubistic time," then, according to Demby, is not simply Cubism and time fused into one, but rather it involves sophisticated themes concerning existential phenomenology and the narratological style of metanarrative, which can then be utilised in order to elucidate his artistic vision through his convoluted use of perspective and fragmented time.

It is clear, then, that in *The Catacombs*, Demby uses complex systems of thought; the novel explores the use of time and perspectives in a fragmented manner that should

be viewed as a larger whole to be understood properly. By combining aesthetic ideas taken from Cubism and fusing them with a phenomenological narrative technique, Demby effectively produces a unique novel which efficaciously mirrors his own artistic vision. Although Demby's fusing of fact and fiction might sometimes blur the lines between the real and imagined, this is a literary technique which is designed to make the reader part of the creative process. It is evident that Demby was doing more than just "fooling around" (40) with his theory of cubistic time, and that, instead, he was using an original narrative technique that combined artistic, philosophical, and literary theories to produce a work of literature that finally appears to be attracting scholarly attention after years of relative obscurity.[4]

[4] *The Catacombs,* along with Demby's first novel, *Beetlecreek,* which was originally published in 1950, is due to be reissued by Vintage Books in early 2026. This will be only the third publication of *The Catacombs* to date, with the last publication being the Northeastern University Press paperback publication in 1991.

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"In these Moments I Hate Language": Reading David Wojnarowicz's Typewriter and Tape Recorder

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David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) was a multimedia artist, a writer, and an activist. This paper examines how Wojnarowicz navigates the tension between the limitations of language and its use as a medium for articulating his queer life and death through his typewriter and tape recorder. While Wojnarowicz detests language as part of the structural oppression in the US, he relies on language and writing as an expressive outlet and a political tool against the oppressive system. Focusing on *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz* (2018), this paper explores his thinking and experimental writing practices. Combining both Lacanian psychoanalysis and German media theory as a bridge between the symbolic and the material, it interprets how Wojnarowicz transforms his senses and body from the unconscious mind to the concrete political reality through the operation of media technologies.

Keywords: David Wojnarowicz, typewriter, tape recorder, German media theory, language and writing

Fig. 1: David Wojnarowicz, *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, 1986; acrylic, spraypaint, and collage on masonite, 72 x 84 ins. (182.9 x 213.4 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) was a multi-media artist, a writer, and an HIV/AIDS activist closely associated with the East Village art scenes in New York City. In his 1986 collage painting, *History Keeps Me Awake at Night (For Rilo Chmielorz)*, Wojnarowicz offers a vision of precarity and chaos in a crumbling US society (see fig. 1). The images (mostly stencilled or industrially printed materials) of a monstrous body, a blue organ, a man holding a gun pointing towards the viewer, assembly lines, and a falling classical column and statue are presented against the backdrop of torn-up world maps, US dollar bills, coupons, and a picture of the human anatomy. These pre-existent motifs are recycled as representation of imperialism, capitalism, and violence that intrude into the unconscious, appearing as restless dreams of the man underneath. This work is representative of Wojnarowicz's political thought, affect, and lived experience as a gay man in the US during the peak of the AIDS crisis: his oppressed sexuality, his anxiety, and his rage and hatred against the preestablished sociopolitical structures, which he repeatedly refers to as the "preinvented world" or "the Other World" (*Knives* 87). While Wojnarowicz expresses these emotions through circulating motifs in his visual arts, they are unrepresentable for him, especially in the form of letters and words: "the idea of all the sensation being reduced to a word called panic is insulting" (*Weight* 146).[1]

Wojnarowicz's relation to language is self-contradictory. On the one hand, he regards language as part of the preinvented system, incapable of capturing his lived experience and all the conscious and unconscious elements crowding his mind:

> In these moments I hate language. I hate what words are like. I hate the idea of putting these preformed gestures on the tip of my tongue through my lips or through the inside of my mouth […] it seems like so much bullshit. It just seems like sounds have been uttered back and forth now over centuries. And it always boils down to the same meaning in those sounds, unless you're intense in uttering them, or you precede them or accompany them with certain forms of violence. (*Weight* 148)

On the other hand, the limitation of language did not stop him from writing. As a prolific, hybrid writer and a keen correspondent during his lifetime, Wojnarowicz considers writing to be both a compulsion and a refuge, a means of processing his emotions and confronting his fears: "if I were to ever become ill and so weak that I couldn't leave the house, […] at least I could write. I could write my way out" (94). While seeking to articulate his queer experiences (the signified) beyond language, he unavoidably relies on the preestablished signifiers to do so. With this paradox as a focal point, I ask: how does the dilemma between writing as both an access and obstacle to Wojnarowicz's body and senses shape the ways he conveys meaning? How does Wojnarowicz navigate his love-hate views on language in his very use of it? To unpack this tension, I will examine Wojnarowicz's thinking on writing and the ways in which he practices it—characterised

[1] Throughout this paper, Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* is cited as *Knives,* his *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journal of David Wojnarowicz* is cited as *Weight*.

by its intense fragmentariness, detailed and visualised description of day-to-day events, and blunt exposure of his thoughts, emotions, imagination, and desire. I will focus on the role of writing instruments in shaping such style, bringing together *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz* (2018), respectively demonstrating how Wojnarowicz engages with the typewriter and the tape recorder. *Close to the Knives* is a collection of eight creative essays in which Wojnarowicz applies visual analogies to not only travel through time and space to retell his queer life—one that is constantly disrupted by past trauma, erotic fantasies, illness (HIV/AIDS), and death—but also to visualise the preinvented world that is invisible and abstract to him. The incoherent, disintegrative characteristics of his life are embodied in the technique of automatic writing that Wojnarowicz employs, as if he were a typewriter that mechanically "shake out" his sensations and streams of consciousness without alteration and pauses (Carr 107). *Weight of the Earth* includes the transcription of eleven cassettes that Wojnarowicz recorded in 1981, 1982, 1988, and 1989; he labelled these as his "tape journals." It covers periods missing from his written journals and has received limited critical attention. As noted on the back cover, these recordings "capture Wojnarowicz's ideas unfolding in real time," intimately revealing his love life, his previous night's dreams, his reflections on life and art, and his struggle with his HIV/AIDS diagnosis together with his fear of death. However, the book itself, edited by Lisa Darms and David O'Neill and published posthumously, creates a temporal and material gap between what Wojnarowicz produced and what the readers encounter today, ultimately affecting the experience of reading and interpretation.

Acknowledging my lack of access to Wojnarowicz's original recordings and his manuscripts, I will approach the two works not just as texts but as mediation of Wojnarowicz's thinking and demonstration of his writing practices—under the circumstance of language's paradox. I will begin with Jacques Lacan's seminal text "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," which draws parallels between the concept of the "letter" as a basic differential element of language and as a material substrate that foregrounds the unconscious. While Lacan's essay is useful for interpreting Wojnarowicz's uneasiness with the preinvented language, it does not address the materiality of language, namely how it is put into work through technologies of writing in the (post)modern period. I will therefore turn to German media theory, which critiques French poststructuralism's fixation on discourse and calls attention to the materiality and technicity of language and media. Combining both approaches as a bridge between the symbolic and the material, I will first examine Wojnarowicz's paradoxical perception of writing and language in the context of existing scholarship, before offering a close analysis of his two works. In addition to texts, my reading will attend to Wojnarowicz's typewriter and tape recorder, which—in light of German media theory's, particularly Friedrich Kittler's approach to literature on a material level—operate texts and ontology in the concrete reality.

Writing's Contradiction and Materiality

In the title essay of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz describes the political conditions of living in the preinvented world:

> First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. […] A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth nor space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. (87–8)

What Wojnarowicz means by "the World" is not a natural world without human mediation—without politics, economics, or culture—but a world that allows one to assert agency: "A place that might be described as interior world […] where movement was comfortable, where boundaries were stretched or obliterated: no walls, borders, language or fear" (108). This world exists prior to it being alienated into "the Other World"; the latter is a world where spaces and bodies are "owned" and privatised, a world inflicted by class conflicts and heteronormativity and regulated by language. But what is language's role in this process?

Lacan makes a similar argument regarding how "language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it"; each subject is, in Lacan's words, "the slave of language" (112–3). Here, he is not advocating for the artificial alteration or abolishment of pre-existing language but rather emphasising the historicity and contingency of language as an irreplaceable, inescapable means of intercourse. This resonates with Wojnarowicz's wrestling with language: while cynically expressing his hatred towards words and sounds of unchanged meanings that "have been uttered back and forth now over centuries," he goes on to claim that this can be challenged if "you're intense in uttering them, or you precede them or accompany them with certain forms of violence" (*Weight* 148). I argue that what Wojnarowicz rejects is not language itself, but the ways in which language is exploited by the ruling class for ideological purposes. As a tool, it must be utilised with intensity or violence in order to contest the discourses of "the Other World."

Through a similar Lacanian lens, both Jacob Mullan Lipman and Louis Shankars argue that Wojnarowicz's portrayals of queerness serve as pathways to achieve the Lacanian "Real" (a state of nature irretrievably lost through the acquisition of language) beyond the preinvented existence [2] Yet, their readings point to more than the unconscious or queer representation. For Wojnarowicz, the use of language—namely writing and publicising marginalised voices—is a means to a political end, as concluded in previous research. Some scholars emphasise the politics of the body: Lauren DeLand designates the motifs of diseased and deceased bodies in Wojnarowicz's works as "useful

[2] For a Lacanian reading of Wojnarowicz's notion of "the Other World," see Shankar 53–60.

corpse" for "expos[ing] the ravages of the AIDS crisis" (34); Tomasz Sikora considers his works and activism as "counter-necropolitics," a form of bio-resistance that reclaims and employs the "symbolic markers of death" (e.g., corpses, ashes, etc.) for "affective-political mobilisation" (84). Others focus on rhetoric. Jonathan Sedberry also analyses Wojnarowicz's paradoxical relationship with language, but through the perspective of William S. Burroughs' influence; both writers recognise language as a mechanism of control while seeking to "manipulate" it (27). As he interprets, "Wojnarowicz decided that if he could not escape language, he would turn the weapon against itself and against his enemies to spark others to activism" (28). Such usage of language is termed as "counter-rhetoric," namely confronting conservative, homophobic rhetoric with "brutally honest, colloquial, often vulgar rhetoric" (23).

Following this definition, I read "imagination"—with its ability to "adap[t] and stret[ch] the boundaries of the Other World"—as central to Wojnarowicz's counter-rhetoric, despite his acknowledgement that it remains "encoded with the invented information of the Other World" (*Knives* 88). In practice, Wojnarowicz writes of violent or erotic visuals and events that are not present in reality or to his senses: "At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can […] douse [Senator Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire" (120). Jack Halberstam theorises this rhetoric as "imagined violence," arguing that "[f]or Wojnarowicz, language itself becomes a weapon, a tool, and a technology and the act of imagination becomes a violent act" (193). In his analysis, Wojnarowicz's writing opens up the possibility of retaliating violence with violence in queer politics and transforms the "force of [violent] fantasy" into "productive fear" (195). Besides rhetorical violence, Wojnarowicz also resorts to the envisagement of eroticism, interpreted by Lipman as a "queer horizon-space" detached from the Lacanian symbolic order; in other words, true queerness, for Wojnarowicz, is utopian and pre-symbolic and therefore cannot be represented through (pre-)existing semiotic structures (364–5). This again resonates with Lacan's contention that subjectivity is paradoxical: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (126). Because of the asymmetry between the signifier and the signified, the "I" as the thinker and speaker of the "I" are "excentric" to the "I" who is thought and spoken of by the "I"; the former fixates on conscious discourse, the latter on unconscious discourse (125; see also Muller and Richardson 167–8).

What Wojnarowicz aims to achieve in his artistic creation is precisely to disrupt this subjective dissent and to access his unconscious self, or, in his words, to "search for some kind of self-truth" (*Weight* 120). It is through imagination that he "turn[s] upside down" his subjectivity formed under the preinvented world, calling for a utopia where there are "no longer countries, no longer borders, no longer governments or wars" (*Weight* 121–2). In *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, for example, Wojnarowicz plays with the irony between the dreaming of cultural symbols in Western civilisation and the title suggesting the wakefulness of the "I" who creates the painting. The two selves presented here demonstrate Wojnarowicz's politics in artmaking: the mechanism of US imperialism is

deeply incorporated into the unconscious mind of the sleeping, ignorant self (the painted subject), whereas Wojnarowicz (the painter) brings that intangible mechanism to the conscious awareness by literally cutting visual motifs of "the Other World" into pieces and rearranging them to subvert their original meanings and functions and to invent new ones.

How does Wojnarowicz apply this approach to his writing for the emancipation of oppressed subjectivities, when discourse itself can only be severed into the basic structure of letters? One may argue that his achronological, fragmentary, and highly visualised way of writing was drawn from Burroughs' cut-up mode and use of parataxis, which allowed him to "explore the contingencies and literary potential of cinematic and queer time" (Anderson 125 ; see also Sedberry). What I am interested in, however, is Wojnarowicz's use of the typewriter and the tape recorder in this process—technologies that materialise language in the first place.

Contemporary to Wojnarowicz's most active years was the emergence of German media theory in the 1980s, aiming to "reconceptualize media by moving away from the established 'logocentric' narrative that starts out with the immediacy of oral communication" (Siegert 52). As the German response to French poststructuralism, it redirected critical theory's focus from the "representation of meaning" to the "conditions of representation," namely from French theory's preoccupation with discourse to the external and material conditions which constitute discourse in the first place (50). This material turn calls attention to the significance of media technologies, discourse operators, and pedagogical practices—placed under the umbrella term of "cultural techniques" (*Kulturtechniken*)—to "intellectual and cultural shifts" (50). Furthermore, the terminology "cultural techniques," as the discipline's development in the 2000s, reflects its tie to the traditional, bourgeois construction of "culture," which associates the maturation of an individual with the acquisition of literacy through the technical skills of reading and writing (*Bildung*) (57). In other words, the conceptualisation of cultural techniques does not aim to simply challenge the "sovereignty of the book" but to emphasise how new media technologies are also subject to the same paradigm of cultural hegemony (57).

Wojnarowicz recognises the same problem, using instruction manuals as a metonymy for the exploitation of cultural techniques for political agendas. As he claims, the people who faithfully read and follow instruction manuals are "in positions of power," because they are the same "people who control the means of image production […] Owners of newspapers and owners of tv stations are the ones who have the most power" (*Knives* 139). In what follows, I will examine how Wojnarowicz, while aware that writing is imprisoned by language and its instruments, uses the typewriter and the tape recorder to transform his transient thoughts, senses, and body into the enduring media of text and sound, minimising the loss inherent in linguistic mediation, thereby allowing for the publicisation of queerness and death.

Wojnarowicz's Typewriter

Fig. 2: *Untitled (David typing at his sister Pat's home in France)*, 1979; black and white photograph, 5 1/4 x 3 1/2 ins. (13.3 x 8.9 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

In 1978, on his 24th birthday, Wojnarowicz arrived in Paris to briefly live with his sister, who bought an Underwood typewriter for him as a birthday gift (see fig. 2). As he loitered in Paris to look for marginalised characters for his creative project, he would "walk the streets and accept the return of those senses and return home and push them through the typewriter" (Carr 120). According to Wojnarowicz's biographer Cynthia Carr, it was also around this time that Wojnarowicz found his voice as a "visual writer": "David kept trying to access his subconscious through lofty imagery and a kind of automatic writing, hoping no doubt that something 'real' would shake out" (107). This approach is crucial for understanding Wojnarowicz's later texts, particularly his journal writing in *Close to the Knives*. Throughout his life, Wojnarowicz wrote both by hand and on his typewriter. While I am unable to verify the actual writing and editing process of *Knives*, some chapters or paragraphs are distinctly typewritten, most prominently in the opening essay "Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds." Originally published in 1984, the six-page text recounts Wojnarowicz's teenage years as a street hustler with little attention to grammar or

orthography. According to Sedberry, this chapter is a practice of the "spontaneous prose" developed by Jack Kerouac, who, alongside Burroughs, was a pioneer of the Beat Generation literary movement that inspired Wojnarowicz. This style, as Kerouac defines, follows "free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought" (qtd. in Sedberry 26). It "reflects [Wojnarowicz's] energy, as he cannot contain his expression within properly punctuated sentences" (Sedberry 26). Letters and words run through the keyboard—as if even the typewriter could not catch up with the speed of the typist's stream of consciousness—as Wojnarowicz recalls his street friend, his sleepless, homeless nights, and his sex work. Random details are often added in clauses without contextualisation, which makes the unpunctuated text even more difficult to follow. But Wojnarowicz also enjoys greater freedom in manipulating the language that he struggles to escape. For example, in the chapter's last sentence, which spans over three pages, Wojnarowicz writes about one of his clients:

> […] and then there's the fetishist who one time years ago picked me up and told me this story of how he used to be in the one platoon in fort dix where they shoved all the idiots and illiterates and poor bastards that thought kinda slow and the ones with speeth spitch speeeeeeech [*sic*] impediments that means you talk funny he said and I nodded one of my silent yes's that I'd give as conversation to anyone with a tongue in those days and […] (*Knives* 7)

It is unclear whether the "speeth spitch speeeeeeech" here is a typo that Wojnarowicz corrects by excessively pounding e's out of frustration or a problematic mockery of speech disorder. In either case, the process of typewriting is hinted at in the misspelling that appears conspicuously peculiar in publication, actively engaging the reader by calling for extra effort to interpret.

I will further elaborate Wojnarowicz's use of the typewriter through the lens of Friedrich Kittler, one of the key scholars in German media theory. In tracing the history of the typewriter, Kittler examines how its invention and popularisation transformed not only the epistemology of writing but also ontology: "when writing was withdrawn from the origin of its essence, i.e., from the hand, and was transferred to the machine, a transformation occurred in the relation of Being to man" (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 199). That is, the traditional dichotomies of man and animal, culture and nature are predicated on the handwritten word that represents literacy, but the typewriter strips the humanity of the word, "degrad[ing]" it to a mere means of communication and a series of meaningless material signifiers on the keyboard (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 199). As noted by Kittler, the earliest typewriters were designed for blind people without the function of seeing instantly what has been typed, while the new model by Underwood in 1897 made possible "immediate visual control over the output" (203). Its "singular and spatialized, material and standardized" keys ensured that typewriting "can and must remain a blind activity," contrary to handwriting that requires the eye to follow the image of the written words (203, 229). As Kittler theorises, "Underwood's innovation unlinks hand,

eye, and letter," replacing the aforementioned dichotomies with "the play between type and its Other, completely removed from subjects. Its name is inscription" (*Discourse Network* 195). In other words, the construction of identity is no longer philosophised through one's relation to the "Other" but the technology of writing, which is what materialises the notion of self and the Lacanian "letter"; the basic structure of the symbolic is transfigured into the tangible signs on the keyboard and the space between them, retaining "complete certainty" without having to rely on the human senses (193n83). How does this ontological shift enable Wojnarowicz to fish "something 'real'" through texts? Foregrounding upon his early typewriting practices in Paris, Wojnarowicz later developed a more methodical visual analogy for representing everyday queer life, particularly in "In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins." As the third essay of *Knives*, it consists of journals that he kept during his cross-country road trip to Arizona in 1985. Driving days and nights, alone, with his eyes fixated on the road, Wojnarowicz starts eroticising the "empty and pressured landscapes" in front of him: each car passing by contains a potential cruiser for his sexual fantasy and is a reminder of his sexual encounters in the past (*Knives* 26). This triggers him to ponder the relation between vision and memory:

> There is really no difference between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision. Vision is made of subtle fragmented movements of the eye. These fragmented pieces of the world are turned and pressed into memory before they can register in the brain. Fantasized images are actually made up of millions of disjointed observations collected and collated into the forms and textures of thought. (*Knives* 26)

In this passage, Wojnarowicz analogises his eyes as both a camera and a projector: every lived experience is recorded in fragmented images composed in different camera angles and movements and archived in his brain for later usage. When indulging in memory, fantasy, or dreams, he sees in his mind the snapshots retrieved from the past and, in a Freudian fashion, projected onto his vision. Does this process change both the acts of writing and reading into an act of watching? Or, as Wojnarowicz asks: "If light does come from within does that make us moving movie projectors? Are we casting forms onto a dark screen?" (52–3). As Wojnarowicz transcribes the archived images into text, the role of the camera/projector is transferred from the eyes to the typewriter, a machine that allows him to lay down his thoughts/visions without hesitation, reconsideration, or alteration while instantaneously gaining a sight of how they are textualised on the paper. It is precisely the liberation from visibility on the keyboard that enables Wojnarowicz to employ automatic, visual(ised) writing. Whatever visions he has in mind—real or imagined—and whatever sensations he feels are pounded through the concrete keys, while rapid shifting of subjects and visual motifs in his texts is accommodated by the typewriter's mechanical speed. As readers, we are not reading the text but are "hooked" into the "filmic exchange" between "vision and memory"—as Wojnarowicz is—seeing through the text as if watching a slide show or a video from a projector screen (27). Through this process of image-text-image, Wojnarowicz illustrates a

queer temporality that is constantly distracted and disrupted by eroticism and/or violence.

The analogy between the eyes and the camera/projector also enforces a distance between Wojnarowicz as a subject seeing and inscribing his vision and a subject within the vision itself, as if he is an observer of his own life; he calls this "sub-vision," in which his "eyes had disconnected from the nerves of the brain" to observe himself (*Knives* 24). By imagining the duplication of or disconnection from his body, Wojnarowicz is in control of epistemology. It is a visualisation of how the self knows the self. This, I argue, is parallel to Kittler's account of how the typewriter displaces the subject of writing. Working as an active operator that determines the basic structure of discourse, the typewriter shifts writing from an embodied, affective human action to an intersubjective engagement with machines, in the same way as Wojnarowicz changes his subjectivity to objective observation of the political reality he is situated in.

Zooming out, Wojnarowicz imagines monitoring himself "from miles above the earth" to understand more clearly how his body is placed against the broad political landscapes beyond his control; he calls this an "X-ray of Civilization" (*Knives* 112). For example, in a long, unpunctuated paragraph in which Wojnarowicz describes the death of his friend Keith Davis from HIV/AIDS, he observes himself standing next to the deathbed from a bird's eye view as his vision moves outwards and upwards from the hospital to various seemingly irrelevant locations:

> […] and I'm totally amazed at how quietly he dies how beautiful everything is with us holding him down on the bed on the floor fourteen stories above the earth and the light and wind scattering outside the windows and his folks at this moment standing somewhere on the observation deck of the empire state building hundreds of stories up in the clouds and light and how perfect that is to me how the whole world is still turning and somewhere it's raining and somewhere it's snowing and somewhere forest fires rage and somewhere else something moves beneath dark waters […] and at the moment I'm a sixteen-foot-tall five-hundred-and-forty-eight-pound man inside this six-foot body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release. (82–3)

The speed of typewriting can be "felt" in the text: the absence of punctuation, the use of polysyndeton, along with the accumulation of acrophobic images, represent the escalation and acceleration of Wojnarowicz's emotions from witnessing death and from revisiting the event in his typewriting. His helplessness and vulnerability are mapped out against a whole world that is still turning, a world that refuses to recognise the AIDS crisis. Death is trivialised by the US government, analogous to how the flickering of natural and urban sceneries trivialises the tiny human figures mourning in the hospital. The camera eventually returns to his own body and the measurement of it—a body that is too small to contain the immensity of his sadness and anger. Through his fusing of vision/memory and his observer vision, Wojnarowicz is no longer a writer but a typist of his visions. As the typewriter emancipates the writer from vision and reduces words and letters to raw,

signifying materials, it renders the writing act mechanical as well. His typing hands are only used for transcribing what he sees and feels, rather than mediating or intervening, as if the typewriter is an image-to-text machine from within—from the position of the signified. The many kinds of visions, imaginations, and voices are laid bare, presenting—without reservation—the imageries of sex, violence, and mourning, imageries that are censored by the preinvented world.

The interplay between image and text is further explored in Wojnarowicz's late multi-media works, including *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988–89), *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* (1990), and *When I put My Hands on Your Body* (1990). Particularly, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* mourns the death of Wojnarowicz's closest friend and mentor Peter Hujar, who died of HIV/AIDS in 1987 (see fig. 3). The work features three prints of another piece by Wojnarowicz: *Untitled (Peter Hujar)* (1988), which consists of photographs of Hujar's corpse on his deathbed; they are surrounded by images of letters taken from supermarket posters, torn to the point of unrecognisable, fragments of US dollar bills, and world maps cut into sperm-cell shapes, signifying the transmission of HIV. Above this assemblage, Wojnarowicz screenprints a text in a serif typeface that would be later published as the coda to "Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician" (see *Knives* 160–2). Composed using Burroughs' cut-up mode, the text is a collage of clauses and sentences from Wojnarowicz's earlier writings—many of which also appear elsewhere in *Knives*—to channel his rage against homophobic speeches from religious and political leaders. Here, Wojnarowicz's own use of language overlays his manipulation of pre-existing symbols, plasticising the process of protesting rhetoric with rhetoric and image with image.

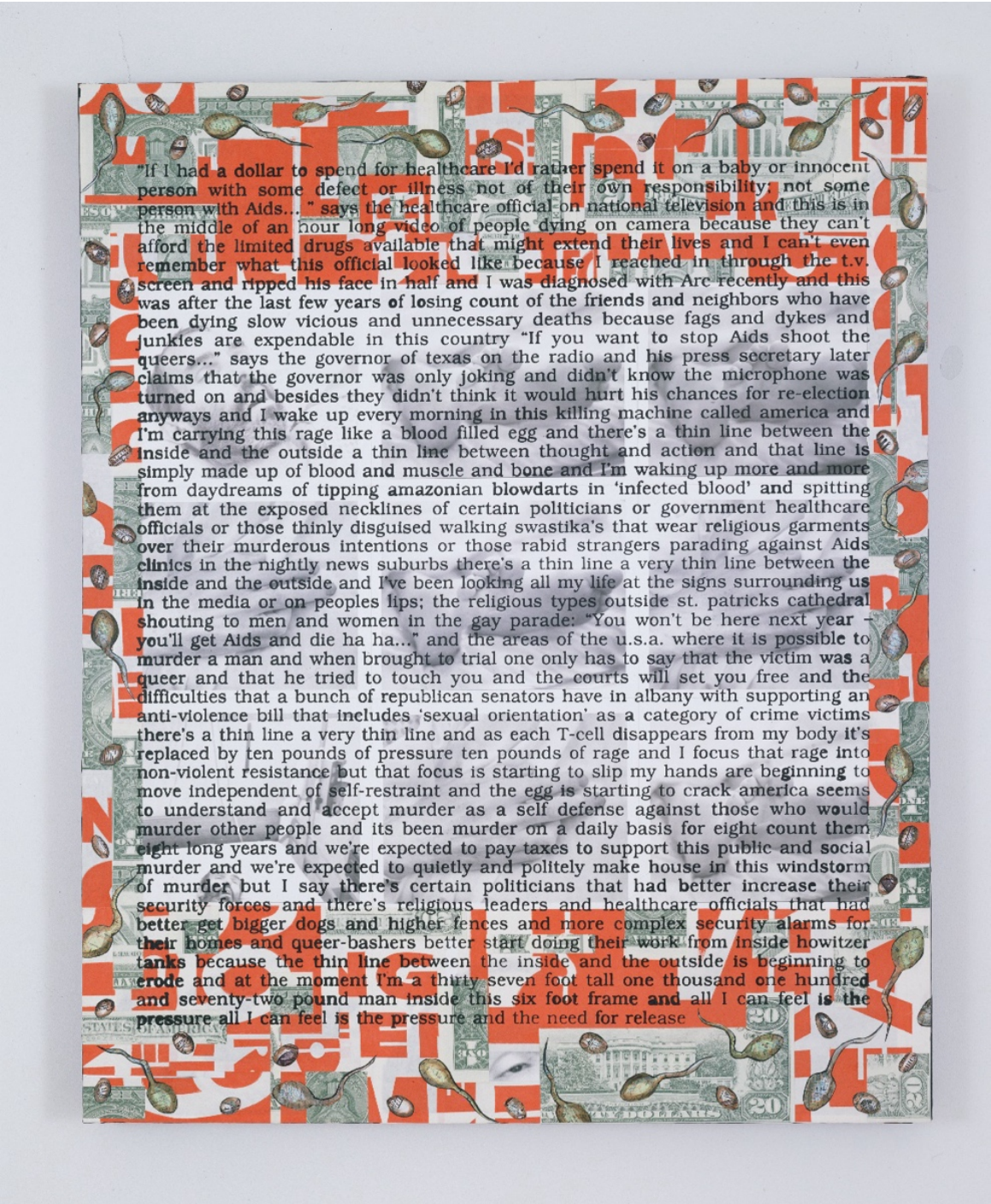

Fig. 3: David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, 1988; black and white photograph, acrylic, text, and collage on masonite, 39 x 32 ins. (99 x 81.2 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

Wojnarowicz's Tape Recorder

Whenever Wojnarowicz was asked what instrument he played in *3 Teens Kill 4*, a musical group based in the East Village which he was a member of, he would always reply: "Tape recorder" (Carr 168). Besides singing, lyric writing, and playing with objects for sound effects, Wojnarowicz used "his tapes of traffic and street talk and random bits from the radio" in their performance (Carr 168). His experimentation with the tape recorder also features in the last and longest essay in *Close to the Knives*. Titled "The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole," it investigates the life and death of Wojnarowicz's friend Dakota, a social outcast whom Wojnarowicz deeply empathises with. In this chapter, each entry details the media of the source materials, such as "Tape Recording," "Phone Call," "Journal Entry," and "Dream." Transcriptions of interviews with Dakota's friends are intersected with Wojnarowicz's own life-writing. As Tasia M. Hane-Devore argues, in this essay, Wojnarowicz conflates and mingles his "personal bodily experiences with those of others," mourning not only the death of Dakota but also his own death in the future and the collective death of the queer community: he "feels his own body, and thus his own corporeal death, inextricably linked" (103). Building on her interpretation, I emphasise the role of the tape recorder in mediating Dakota's presence not through his own voice, but through the voices of those who remember him. In this way, the absence imposed by death is collectively testified and embodied.

The use of the tape recorder is recurrent in contemporary literature and art, especially in the second half of the 20th century (see Edmond; Kim-Cohen; Stadler; Teague). As Argentinian artist Eduardo Costa claims in his *Tape Poems* (1969), "[t]he tape recorder is already as necessary as the typewriter" (qtd. in Rottner 103). Indeed, as Jessica Teague suggests, tape recording technology enjoyed a special status in the history of literary engagement because, unlike the phonograph, it was recognised as "a sound technology that writers could actually use"; its portability enabled sound recording beyond the studio, promoting the emergence of the "bootleg culture in both music and poetry" (95). Despite its prominence, the mediality and technicality of sound-recording technology were overlooked in the field of philosophy upon its invention (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 94). Alongside the typewriter, which standardised letters, film and gramophone "were engulfed by the noise of the real—the fuzziness of cinematic pictures, the hissing of tape recordings"; the three media from the late 19th century jointly terminated the monopoly of words, separating "optical, acoustic, and written data flows, thereby rendering them autonomous" (14). Particularly, Kittler draws on semiotics and psychoanalysis to underscore phonograph's ability to "record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning"; the freedom to "babble" in the talking cure as a means of reaching the "Real" of the unconscious parallels the capacity of sound recording technology to capture all the undecipherable noise in speech (16). Wojnarowicz's tape journals in *Weight of Earth*, however, are devoid of noise—the noise of "cars rushing past, birds chirping, and ghostly snippets of long-gone radio"—except for the occasional footnotes that notify the inaudibility of the tapes; this

is because, published as a book, his tape recordings were transcribed intermedially, correctly punctuated, and edited posthumously (Darms and O'Neill 16). What has also been lost in the text is, as noted by the editors, "the intonation and cadence of his voice, the regular click of his cigarette lighter, and an undeniable bodily presence" (20). While the editors/listeners of the tapes can no longer verify the phonemes uttered by him, the prevalent ambient sounds remain representable in the system of writing.

Wojnarowicz discovered this new medium for journalling in March 1981, only a few months after *3 Teens Kill 4* performed their first gig. Similar to his typewritten essays in *Knives*, he usually starts a recording after waking up in his room; looking out the window while speaking, he would often spot some guy down the street and start indulging in the sexual reveries focused on his body. In the first two tapes, dated in the same month, Wojnarowicz tirelessly analyses why a lover named Bill never calls. He examines his desire for a relationship with Bill, recounting details of their get-togethers and the long wait for Bill's response on the answering machine in-between. Through talking into the recorder, Wojnarowicz eventually convinces himself that he needs to break it off with Bill. After an intense fight, they calm down and have dinner for the last time. Wojnarowicz describes this scene as "almost filmlike or drama-like": "It was this sensation of being inside my own body, sitting at a table, going through motions that were almost not believable to me. […] it was like I had so many thoughts contained" (*Weight* 53). The disconnection between thoughts and body, a vision also present in *Knives*, is embodied by the tape recorder, which materialises and concretises thoughts and feelings that are too intense and transient to be represented in written forms.

In the next tape from 1982, labelled as the "Junk Journal," Wojnarowicz records lengthy illustrations of his hallucinations and dreams under the influence of heroin. Like in *Knives*, Wojnarowicz uses the vision/film analogy to recreate his senses in the form of words and sounds: images of "bizarre paintings" and "animal-type things" change in his vision "like the flickering of a single-frame film in extremely vivid colors" (*Weight* 68). Wojnarowicz subsequently stopped his tape journals until 1988—after the death of Hujar and his own diagnosis of HIV/AIDS. Wojnarowicz's reflection on art has become more profound, his tone more melancholic, and his fear no longer centres around loneliness, but death, which permeates the rest of the eight tapes:

> I realized that I was just afraid of dying, and somehow it's hard for me to look at that. I look at it and just say, "OK, you know, yeah, I'm afraid of dying." In that odd moment of thinking of death, I don't want to go, I don't want to die. Or I don't want to see it coming. (93)

The use of quotation marks here suggests that the speech is not directed to the recording device but to Wojnarowicz himself, which distances him further from his self, as if he is tentatively convincing the self's second entity that death is not that scary. Nonetheless, Wojnarowicz needs to say it out loud to be able to face his fear of death. In this moment, the tape recorder becomes not merely a tool for externalising thoughts but a

confessional space for confronting the extreme vulnerability of his own mortality. Such space possesses a tangible materiality, as the physical presence of the recording machine can be gripped in the author's hands, connecting his unconscious mind, through his voice, directly to a potential audience in the future.

However, as *Weight*'s editors reflect, citing Carr: "'The central struggle in [Wojnarowicz's] life was about how much to reveal. Who was safe? What could he tell?'[(Carr 5).] Are we, as readers of this book, 'safe'?" (Darms and O'Neill 20). While the ambience and the "level of intensity and tenderness" in the tapes are unrepresentable in book form (Darms and O'Neill 20), the intimate, naked immediacy of his spoken words—his authorship—has already been altered by the very process of recording, affected by the limitations of the technology and by his insecurity in using it:

> I just can't stand my self-consciousness when I talk into this thing. I think it's because I'm afraid of getting at all this stuff inside my head and the idea of someone witnessing this tape. It's just something I've always found in the past, but if I keep talking into it, I lose the self-consciousness and I can just do it and get at stuff that's deep underneath all this. (*Weight* 78)

Wojnarowicz is again being self-contradictory with the act of writing/recording: on the one hand, there is the anxiety arising from the potential for others to hear these deeply personal reflections, especially in a form that renders them permanent, legible, and open to interpretation; on the other hand, speaking his thoughts out loud towards the tape recorder as his audience is the only way for him to alleviate his anxiety, to reach his unconscious mind.

Parallel to his urge to simultaneously "get at" and do away with his unconscious (*Weight* 78), Wojnarowicz's impulse to record and his fear of being listened to reflects Jacques Derrida's "archival turn" in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis. Derrida namely argues that the archivist's desire to preserve is overcome by the death drive to "destroy the archive," because the act of archivisation is "anarchivic"; it inevitably leads to oblivion (Derrida 10; see also Huang). In this sense, the tape recorder is used as a medium between disclosure and concealment. The unconscious is where anxiety is repressed and hidden "deep underneath"; in order to be released from the latter, Wojnarowicz must access the former through talking to the tape recorder (*Weight* 78). However, the exposure of himself to the recorder generates a new circle of anxiety, which is again something buried in the unconscious, something unexplainable, "something [he has] always found in the past" (*Weight* 78). Wojnarowicz's split-mindedness about tape-recording is linked to his use and hatred of language, further capturing the ambivalence of the queer archive. His works function as "text-as-records" of queer counterpublic histories (Guenther 75) and align with Ann Cvetkovich's archive of feelings—the documentation of queer ephemera and affects as resistance and a response to the trauma throughout queer history. Yet, queer representation in the archive also risks having queerness "universalized," and therefore should not be treated as a solution to trauma, as Sara Edenheim critiques (47). Following Wojnarowicz's logic, the archive, like language, is an institutionalised, preinvented existence but at the same time has the

power to revolt itself if used with intensity and violence. Through a reading of Wojnarowicz's typewriter and tape recorder, the act of "reading" itself is changed to that of watching or listening, and the act of writing is changed to the application of cultural techniques as an act of resistance against the erasure of Wojnarowicz's body and identity. The visions that he typewrites—visions of eroticism, imagined violence, and the tiny, unimportant figure of his self against the political landscape amid the AIDS crisis—along with the sad, anxious, intimidated voices that speak of insecurity and death become a "dismantling tool" against the preinvented world, resisting both the silence enforced by death and the US government's necropolitical silencing of death (*Knives* 121). Language, for Wojnarowicz, is detestable when systematised for political oppression, but in his aspirations to eradicate the gap between typewritten/spoken texts and his body and senses through his writing instruments, Wojnarowicz exercises a practice of writing that defies the very process that constricts writing.

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Reading the Body as the Site of Dreams/Dreaming/Dreamers in Kathy Acker's Work

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The work of Kathy Acker frequently focuses on female subjects who are constrained by the limitations imposed on their bodies by the phallogocentric structures of society and narrative. Engaging with a statement Acker makes in her essay "Seeing Gender" (1995), "[w]hen I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer" (*Bodies of Work* 166), this article suggests that dreams in Acker's fiction reveal more fluid ways of understanding the body, and that various motifs, metaphors and narrative techniques – all related to dreams – defy confining bodily boundaries. To indicate the evolution of the relationship between dreams and the body in Acker's oeuvre and shed light on the role of dreams in shaping her narratives, three texts from before, during and after her turn to mythmaking are discussed. First, the way in which dreams, abortions and death influence the boundaries of the bodily site in *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* (1986) is examined. Then, the article explains how the dreamlike figure of the sailor in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) reflects an understanding of the body as, in Judith Butler's words, "*a process of materialization*" (*Bodies That Matter* 9; emphasis in original), while the novel's storyworld blurs the distinction between dream and reality. Additionally, considering the motif of tattooing in relation to Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) illustrates how dreams not only shape the site of the body, but are also shaped by it. Finally, in *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), dreams can be extracted from the site of the possessed body in the form of language through an exorgasm, which can be linked to Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject and McKenzie Wark's discussion of the penetrable body. These readings of the body as the site of dreams/dreaming/dreamers demonstrate that Acker's novels problematize the Cartesian separation of mind and body and contribute to a queer perception of the body.

Keywords: Kathy Acker, dreams, embodiment, Judith Butler, McKenzie Wark

> The dreams we allow to destroy us cause us to be visions/see the vision world.
>
> — Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978)

> When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the acts of perception.
>
> — Kathy Acker, "Seeing Gender" (1995)

Kathy Acker "write[s] the way WWW people do" (Rosie X). At least that is what she tells the readers of Rosie X's e-zine *Geekgirl* in 1995. Acker claims she "take[s] stuff and […] put[s] it here and there" (Rosie X). This approach is particularly evident in her early writings,

which are shaped by deconstruction and decentralization, as Acker states in a 1990 text published in her book of essays and art criticism *Bodies of Work* (1997, 85). For her novel *Great Expectations* (1980), Acker, for instance, makes a "structural analysis" of Charles Dickens's novel of the same name (1860), "cutting it up, not even rewriting, just taking it and putting it together again, like playing with building blocks" (*Hannibal Lecter* 15-16). As part of these cut-up experiments, she incorporates dream material – her dreams and those of others – into her writing practice "to break down the boundaries between waking and dreaming" (Acker, *Hannibal Lecter* 5; Kraus 29). She endeavors to find a method of counteracting "self-censorship," because, as she says in a 1993 interview with R.U. Sirius, she worries that she is "writing what people expect [her] to write, writing from that place where [she] might be ruled by economic considerations."

Even when, from *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) onward, Acker's work becomes "constructive rather than deconstructive," as she puts it, her interest in dreams persists (Friedman 17; Nicholls 36). For example, in 1989, she expresses that she enjoys being confronted with what lies beyond control, beyond the rational (Nicholls 36). The cut-up method of her earlier texts has, however, become inadequate. She realizes that "[d]econstruction is always a reactive thing [in which] you're really reinforcing the society that you hate" (Acker, *Hannibal Lecter* 17). To pursue her ongoing efforts to combat self-censorship, Acker seeks a taboo language that "resists ordinary language," because, as *Empire*'s character Abhor states, "[n]onsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks down the codes" (House 469; Acker, *Bodies of Work* 147; Acker 134). Acker thus "return[s] to narrative" by "moving to a more internally driven process, writing fiction and myth that comes 'from her' and not from someone else" (Wollen 10-11; Gajoux and Finch 124). She now relies on a language that she "can only come upon" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 166) by listening to her body, for example when working out and during sex. As a result, Acker's "language of the body" does not "reif[y] the Descartian mind-body split by denying the existence of the body" (*Bodies of Work* 147, 89). Her writing rather "insists upon the presence, even sacredness, of the experiencing body […] as being one with and at odds with the mind" (Nolan 191, 196). Thus, in many ways, Acker's "*body is her intelligence*" (Nolan 196; emphasis in original).

According to Acker, some of the languages of the body are directly produced by the "material body," like "laughter, silence, screaming," while others "liberate corporeality by undoing fixed sense of self or meaning" (*Bodies of Work* 91-92). The latter category contains "languages of flux" – "in which the 'I' (eye) constantly changes" –, "languages of wonder" – in which "[t]he eye (I) is continuously seeing new phenomena" – and "[l]anguages which contradict themselves" (Houen 179; Acker, *Bodies of Work* 91-92). Logocentric language cannot accurately express the intensity of bodily experiences. Only structures reflecting materiality "controlled by change and by chance" (Cao 75; Acker, *Bodies of Work* 149) can convey the language of the constantly changing body in all its contradictions. Acker's emphasis on the materiality of the body and on

fluctuating identities "rather than having a stable essence" (*Bodies of Work* 92; Borowska 97) calls to mind Judith Butler's work. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler suggests that matter should not be seen as a fixed "site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (9; emphasis in original). The body's materiality is an "effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2). Bodies can then only matter if they are important to the dominant order, the heterosexual matrix.[1]

Like dreams, the languages of the body are "not constructed on hierarchical subject-object relations" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 166). As McKenzie Wark notes in her book *Philosophy for Spiders: On the Low Theory of Kathy Acker* (2021), "[i]n dreams no self is its own property or anyone else's" (73). When dreaming, the dreamer is both the writer and the reader of the dream. Or, as Acker puts it in her essay "Seeing Gender" (1995): "When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the acts of perception." (*Bodies of Work* 166). In this way, dreaming can be understood as a language (that can be found in the site) of the body.

Given that dreams are traditionally related to the mind-pole of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy – because they are "a series of events or images that happen in your *mind* when you are sleeping" ("Dream"; emphasis added) – this article will examine how Acker's dealing with dreams ties into her work with the body, and how it evolves throughout her writing career. To do so, it will read the body as a site of "the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 166) in three of Acker's texts from before, during and after her turn to mythmaking: *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* (1986), *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and *My Mother: Demonology* (1993).

Like Christopher Kocela, who examines Acker's engagement with Butler in his reading of *Pussy, King of Pirates* (1996), this article will read the dreams, the dreaming and the dreamers across Acker's oeuvre in conversation with theories of gendered embodiment from her contemporaries. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980) and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) are foundational texts within the area of poststructuralism and gender studies. This article engages with them not only to understand the context within which Acker wrote her dream- and body-work, but also to add to the extant scholarship that has often read Acker in relation to poststructuralist theory and French feminist theory. To that end, this article also draws upon the work of McKenzie Wark and Kato Trieu, as the

[1] In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defines the heterosexual matrix as "a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (151).

contemporary trans studies approach to Acker raises new questions about embodiment and the performativity of gender in her texts.[2]

Dreams, Death and Abortions in *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream*

Boundary-Blurring Abortions

The abortion in the opening scene of Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* (1986) "problematizes" the patriarchal Cartesian "separation of mind and body which defines woman *as* body and object against a masculine subject," or as "pure matter" (Schlichter par. 13; emphasis in original; Cao 74). By intervening in her material body and "consciously choos[ing] against the feminine roles of motherhood, marriage and reproductivity," the title character becomes "a female-male or a night-knight" (Worthington 246; Acker, *Don Quixote* 10). The body's surface is thus "never merely material" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 131). Since it "is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions," the skin rather designates "the limits of the socially *hegemonic*" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 131; emphasis in original). Wark (110-111) argues that Acker's playful use of gendered language creates mythic worlds where characters can oscillate between different genders – man, woman, girl and boy, as well as the occasional nonhuman – or even assume a plurality of genders. As Margaret Henderson points out, Don Quixote's new role is still very much defined by gender, though: she is a *female*-male – like a "woman president" – and a *night*-knight – or "night to man's day" (151). The abortion thus has boundary-blurring potential, but the outcome remains limited by phallogocentric thinking.

Despite her efforts to transgress the boundaries between male and female, mind and body, and subject and object, by means of her abortion, Don Quixote is held back by the physical pain associated with her female body. "[B]ecoming partly male" proves insufficient to escape her body's limitations: she gets an infection from her abortion and becomes sick (Acker, *Don Quixote* 29, 15). As Butler explains, "[t]he construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 132). Therefore, by breaching the boundaries of the body in an unregulated way – that is, by defying the societal expectations placed on the female body – "a site of pollution and endangerment" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 132) emerges,

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[2] In her review of *Philosophy for Spiders,* Tessel Veneboer points out that Wark provides a reading of Acker that does not deny the philosopher's body but rather demonstrates that "theoretical thinking" is "a bodily task": "Weaving a web of Acker's selves, Wark unwraps herself too" (1, 5). Wark discusses three different philosophies, out of which the first, "of appearances, emotions, bodily functions," a "phenomenology of the body" (60, 81), is especially relevant for analyzing the embodiment of dreams in Acker's work. The second of "the asymmetry of penetration" (Wark 93), which conceptualizes gender in relation to penetration, also proves productive in understanding both the non-cis, non-Cartesian bodies in Acker and the embodied reading experience of her texts. Similarly, Trieu's analysis of the dysphoric body in Acker's work, as presented in his article "Building the Pirate Body" (2020), contributes to an understanding of the body as the unfixed site of the dream/dreaming/dreamer.

causing Don to become ill. For a while, Don's "Dream of Saving The World," which interrupts the linear narrative, provides a "remedy" for her pain (Acker, *Don Quixote* 17). However, given that "[r]eal love is sick," the protagonist realizes she should instead use her illness as "a knightly tool" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 18) to pursue her quest of finding real love. She tries to go past failure – that is, "beyond rationality" and the limits of her body – and chooses to embrace her madness and transform her reality into a dreamlike space of wonder where she can "believe anything" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 18, 19). In short, *Don Quixote* blurs, stretches and reshapes the boundaries between dream and reality, just as she does with the boundaries of her body.

Dreaming and Going Past Death

The dreams in the novel disrupt the linear narrative and blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Similarly, the repetitive and cyclical dying in the novel creates such a blurring between fiction and reality. Dreams and other "insert[s]" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 21, 25) unexpectedly interrupt *Don Quixote*'s narrative just as death interrupts life. In one of these cut-in dreams, "A SCENE OF MADNESS AND/OR THE DREAM OF DON QUIXOTE," Don is told by a man that "[i]f a woman insists she can and does love and her living isn't loveless or dead, she dies" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 31, 33). He presents her with the option of stopping her visions, which will make her normal and will allow her to live. In other words, Don Quixote's attempt to use her dreams to resist being controlled by patriarchal structures, "requires [her] to submit to societal death" (Worthington 252). Even in her own dreams a man can tell her what to do. Eventually her quest fails because she decides to listen to the man and dies (Acker, *Don Quixote* 36). This will not be the only time Don dies, though. Toward the end of the novel, she claims that she is "dead" and later states: "I am dying" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 201, 205). The false endings affirm the narrative's cyclicality and the inability of the quest to move forward (Ellis et al. 27; Walsh 152). Richard Walsh argues that this creates a "sense of entrapment," generating "a nightmare condition of arrested or cyclical time" (153).

Death could be seen as the body's ultimate limit. Kristeva (3) posits that the process of dying entails that the body falls beyond the border of its existence as a living entity. What remains is the corpse, which is "a border that has encroached upon everything" and is turned into "an object" (3-4). Don's body is confined by the limit of death, but dreams allow for a more fluid relation to it. They allow her to move past the failure that is death without "fainting away" (Kristeva 4). For Don, "[d]reams which resemble death heal the wounds from living" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 184). The medicinal effect of death, made possible through dreams, is reminiscent of Amy Nolan's claim that the language of the body "illustrates the necessity of dying in order to be reborn" (195). Bodybuilding, for instance, necessitates the breaking down of muscle for it to grow back larger (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 145-146). The bodily language can be connected to Kristeva's notion of the abject, which Butler designates as "that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other.'" and which, while

giving form to the "not-me," "establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 133). Don searches for her body's borders and surpasses them, "challeng[ing] us to see beyond entrances and exits" and "to accept […] death, and move, via pain, to being in relationship with the world" (Nolan 204). Don thus finds power in the pain inflicted upon her by the Oedipal narrative (Worthington 244). According to Amy Nolan, the disruption of the narrative by the cut-in dreams and dying repetitions "reinforces that notion that death, or disintegration, an interruption to life, enables a subjectivity that cannot exist in life" (205). In her dreams, Don can, for example, be both "agent and object" (Schlichter par. 15). In the realms of death and the imaginary, Cartesian oppositions, such as mind/body, reality/imagination, male/female, life/death, subject/object, and rationality/irrationality lose their significance. So, dreams, dreaming and dreamers in *Don Quixote* offer an alternative, fluxional way of thinking about the body.

The Dreamer's Body as Process

Don Quixote's dreams not only blur and stretch out the body's borders, but, when Don accepts her madness, they can also take on the role of the body's matter:

> I'll no longer speak because you are not hearing and will never hear me no matter how I speak. So I am a mass of dreams [sic] desires, which since I can no longer express them, are foetuses beyond their times, not even abortions. For I can't get rid of un-born-able unbearable dreams, whereas women can get rid of unwanted children. (Acker, Don Quixote 194)

Don's inability to articulate herself in patriarchal language or to find a community with which she could share "a meaningful language outside the dominant discourse" (Walsh 167) turns her into a lump of inexpressible dreams and desires. This challenges the traditional Cartesian dichotomy between the mind and the body. Dreams are not merely cerebral phenomena; they are an integral and vital part of Don's body. Even though her dreams are trapped, Don's dreaming body *is* capable of changing and expanding its borders, approximating a non-Cartesian one. Moreover, Don *does* have access to the the dream language materializing inside of her, but she can only use it when speaking to herself – that is, within the confines of her own body (Acker, *Don Quixote* 195). In this "language which wasn't quite language," homophones like "mourning"/"morning," "night"/"knight" and "nuns"/"nones" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 195, 206) are interchangeable. Don's playful use of language likely adds to the confusing reading experience created by the cut-ins and repetitions. The reader is struck by a sense of *déjà vu*, urging them to pay close attention to the text. They are prompted to question whether there is another relationship between the homophones besides phonetic similarity. According to Trieu, this sensation demonstrates how it takes "a physiological operation" – a language of the body – "to engage with the phenomena of absence" (503), of the unknowable, non-Cartesian body. Experiences that create disturbances in the body or point to its physical limits, such as abortions, provide an opportunity for self-knowledge because they

temporarily put the body in control of how it is formed (Trieu 503; Finck 94). It is where the (female) body can start to escape gender (Trieu 505). Shannon Finck (83) identifies the possibility for self-knowledge in *Don Quixote* as coming from the merging of bodies as texts. The novel's abovementioned nightmarish "sense of entrapment" (Walsh 153) washes over onto the reader who, in merging with the text, feels stuck in the book. As Don states, "[t]he realms of dreams are that of death because the dreamer" – or reader – "doesn't expect" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 184). In accordance with Wark's claim that Acker's philosophy of phenomenology stems from "confusion" or "non knowledge" (63), the constant interruption of the reader's immersion in the book has a physical effect on their body. Trieu interprets Acker's masochistic struggle between ordinary language and language of the body as a means of understanding the impossible body dismissed as "unbornable, unbearable" (504; *Don Quixote* 194). As Don's body must bear her dreams, Don's and Acker's bodies do the same with the "MALE TEXTS" (*Don Quixote* 39) they adopt, and the reader's body with this unbearable book.

"DON QUIXOTE'S DREAM" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 201) further underscores the embodiment of her dreams. She writes down this dream after her death, stressing how she can communicate more freely in the realms of dreams and death. Since she realizes she cannot exist without language or love, she decides to "get married" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 202). Again, this entails that she must stop dreaming. Without dreams her "feelings and touchings [will narrow] into a controllable range," (Acker, *Don Quixote* 202) proving their visceral quality. This same quality is demonstrated when in her dream Don smells a bodily odor so strong that even the nostrils from which the deathly smell emanates, recoil in shame (Acker, *Don Quixote* 205). Thus, Don Quixote's *entire* body functions as the site of the dream, the dreaming and the dreamer (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 166).

Another false ending concludes the novel: the protagonist "aw[akes] to the world which lay before [her]" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 207). The circularity of the novel is foregrounded, proving that "resistance is only possible through the effort, not the result" (Worthington 252). She goes through death and comes back to life, proving that she does not have to succumb to rationality: "[t]he self must be more complicated than life and death, more complicated than duality" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 190). Dreams relieve the hierarchization of mind over body and rationality over irrationality and allow the bodies of the text, of Don, of Acker and of the reader to merge. The fact that Don wakes up "drunk" (Acker, *Don Quixote* 207) seems to indicate that she is still mad. So, despite waking up, she has not lost her ability to dream and blur (bodily) boundaries. As Emilia Borowska argues, madness allows for a "fluid" "passage between reality and the world of dreams" (130). In this way, the fluidity of Don's body is emphasized at the very end of the novel.

Dreamlike Worlds and Dreams Carved onto the Sailor's Body in *Empire of the Senseless*

The Sailor's Body

Empire of the Senseless (1988) marks a shift in Kathy Acker's writing as, instead of relying on cutting up the narrative like in *Don Quixote*, she turns to "to the communal myths that pervade our culture" (Scholder xii) as the structuring element for her work. Kocela (78-79) describes the shift as going from a castrating (cut-up as piracy) to a penetrative writing method. In this new method, piracy takes the form of incorporating other theories and texts, such as Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, into her own fiction by overwriting and merging them with her search for a non-phallocentric myth (Kocela 98). Also, her interest in finding languages of the body in her writing process results in a further development of the body as the site of the dream/dreaming/dreamer. The fluid body of *Don Quixote* paves the way for the bodily fabulations of the figure of the sailor in *Empire* that "does not exist on either side of the gender binary" (Trieu 500) and more overtly breaks down the mind/body split through its connection to the dream world. This non-Cartesian model has as its center the labyrinthine colon instead of the head (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 91). The decapitated body "precedes the mind because only its physiological functions can think through the impossible" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 90; Trieu 504). Acker's sailors have identities that can fluctuate like waves, whose "selves happen as effects" (Wark 147). The cyborg character Abhor observes that "[t]hough the sailor longs for a home, her or his real love is change. Stability in change, change in stability occurs only imaginarily" (Acker, *Empire* 114). The domain of dreams acts as a bridge between the realms of imagination and reality, and the sailor has unimpeded access to this liminal space. This is suggested by the nautical nature of dreams in the novel. The world of these "wet dreams" "is so embodied that words cannot describe it" (Acker, *Empire* 189; Nolan 204). This can be exemplified by a passage where Abhor dreams of having sex with her sailor father:

> Let's fuck on top of this fountain. Splashing the waters of hydro-chloric acid into my nostrils. Daddy. Pull off my fingernails. My back has been carved into roses. You scream that it's not only by you. As if you're alive or as if I'm not dreaming. As if I really possessed you and you really possessed me, we tore off each other's head and ate out the contents, then pecked out the remaining eyes, pulled out the sharks' teeth and sucked opium out of the gums, my vagina was bleeding. And I said to my father, the sailor, 'Let's not be possessed.' (Acker, *Empire* 84)

Alex Houen interprets this visceral passage as the Oedipal ban becoming undone through the medium of dreams, which permit a different type of relationship to the body (182). Like an "Oedipal exorcism," the bodies of Abhor and her father are torn apart, "dislimn[ed]," thereby revealing their fluid and mutable nature, "break[ing] open taboo dreamscapes" (Houen 182, 181) through Acker's language of flux and wonder. The characters' bodies are described as a jumble of different (body) parts that can be sculpted, carved, and taken apart, suggesting that they are in a constant "*process of*

materialization" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 9; emphasis in original). Indeed, Abhor suggests further in the novel that "[h]umans make themselves and 're made through pain plus dreams" (Acker, *Empire* 138). The presentation of the body as a fabrication is reinforced by the fact that the text itself is also presented as such, as Houen notes (182). The dream is conveyed in the "mode of possibility" and "change" through the repetition of "As if …" (Cao 76; Houen 182), which stresses its fictional nature. Upon awakening from her dream, however, all that remains of Abhor's father is his corpse (Acker, *Empire* 85). The non-Oedipal, non-Cartesian body that can go beyond death only exists in dreams. However, by repeating the phrase "[c]arved into roses" (Acker, *Empire* 86) when mentioning that she and Thivai are going to get tattoos, Abhor hints at the ability of tattoos to similarly transform the body.

The Dreamlike World as a Space of Wonder

Like the physical body, the body of the text can go past failure. According to Acker, when writing, the writer is "fucking with" (*Hannibal Lecter* 22) the text. The body of the text is therefore subject to the same laws of "change or chance" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 150) that control the material body. Going past failure with a text means "go[ing] into a space of wonder," a world that "isn't about ownership" (Acker, *Hannibal Lecter* 23). Like in a dream, things become blurry. The distinction between subject and object is unclear and names, sexuality and gender can be left undefined (Acker, *Hannibal Lecter* 23). The writer, reader and characters are thrown "*in medias res* into situations" – like the eye/"I" is in dreams – and sail through these unusual and dreamlike maritime spaces without the prior knowledge of what they are going to write, read or experience (Gajoux and Finch 131; emphasis in original; Acker, *Hannibal Lecter* 23).

Empire of the Senseless's storyworld feels like a space of wonder. The reader is encouraged to leave "their fixed place" and immerse themselves in a world where "[d]ualities are cancelled in favor of an immediate consciousness of the interrelation and interdependence of things" (Kleeman xi; Glück 55). At times the fictional world of the novel bears resemblance to the present-day world, yet it is incomplete and contains gaps, paralleling the nature of a dream. As Alexandra Kleeman writes, "[w]hen viewed from one angle, it remains a recognizable collage of miseries and drab pleasures, a mirror of our own times. But viewed from another, it possesses an alien sheen, the sense of a non-patriarchal, non-phallic newness" (xi). This "hologram"-like (Kleeman xi) quality is underscored by the labyrinthine structure of the plot. *Empire* begins with an "attempt to find a myth," after which the second part "trie[s] to describe a society not defined by the oedipal taboo" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 11, 12). Yet, Acker states that by the conclusion of the latter part, she recognized the impossibility of conceiving such a world and thus returned to her "original question" (*Bodies of Work* 13). The novel's structure seems to coil in on itself. Also, even though dreams do not interrupt the narrative to such an extent as in *Don Quixote*, they still add a disruptive and confusing element. As Abhor's abovementioned dream demonstrates, the dreams are described viscerally and lyrically

(cf. "My back has been carved into roses" (Acker, *Empire* 84)). This could result in an embodied reading experience, in which the reader is invested in the plot without necessarily knowing what is going. Chapters end abruptly – like when the narrator wakes up from their dream – and storylines suddenly switch – as do the narrators – evoking the dream sensation of trying to escape a seemingly endless "series of rooms" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 95). To put it in Wark's terms, even though the textual body is penetrable/ readable in many ways, the penetrator/reader is not its master (162). Instead, the bodies of the text and the reader are both simultaneously penetrator and penetrated, "opening while being opened" (Wark 153-154, 162). Through their contact, they get to know themselves rather than the other. So, the relationship between the textual body and the reader's body lies in the lines of Finck's (83) abovementioned merging of bodies as texts. Thus, despite the turn to a more linear narrative, the novel's space of wonder has a similar effect on the reader as the repetitive dying in *Don Quixote*.

Tattooing Dreams onto the Body

In *Empire*, tattoos reflect how dreams simultaneously shape and are shaped by the body. Dream tattoos mold the site of the body, while also literalizing the embodied experience of dreaming. This can be illustrated by a scene in which Abhor meets with a fortune teller, who provides her with the following prediction:

> As soon as you step out of here, everything in your life will be exactly as it was. You will spend all your time sleeping. When you sleep, you will dream you have a lover. She will be about to come. Always about to come. Your body straining into her will waken you. (Acker, *Empire* 109, 118)

After this encounter, Abhor meets a sailor named Agone. The real world begins to merge with her dream world, resembling "the edges of a dream during the waking state" (Acker, *Empire* 138). In what follows, this article will provide a close reading of a scene where Abhor watches as a dream is inscribed onto the site of Agone's body through a tattoo.

First, dreams allow the site of the body to expand its borders by being carved onto the body's surface, causing pain or pleasure. In her discussion of "The Body as Inscriptive Surface" in her book *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz claims that inscriptions on the skin "function quite literally to increase the surface space of the body, creating out of what may have been formless flesh a series of zones, locations, ridges, hollows, contours: places of special significance and libidinal intensity" (139). The tattoo of the dream creates such zones on Agone's skin, literally making it the site of the dream, the dreaming and the dreamer. During the tattooing process, the body's surface space expands, making it capable of reaching new extremes. Like a bodybuilder, Agone surpasses failure by "turn[ing] his mind from the actuality of this pain away to dream" (Acker, *Empire* 138). This suggests that dreams are more real than physical pain or at least pave the way to another kind of reality or space of wonder.

The process of tattooing the dream coincides with a climb toward a bodily climax, reinforced by a narrative climax. By following how the tattoo gets carved onto Agone's body, which builds suspense, the reader is stimulated to become absorbed in the development of the plot. The narrative accelerates when Agone and the tattoo artist share a sexual experience: "[m]ale hand on male hand. Stomach on stomach. Male feet on male feet. Mouth on mouth. Cock on cock. Agone pulled away from the tattooer before either of them came because he didn't want to reach any port" (Acker, *Empire* 140). This speed, which the reader might also experience through embodied simulation, comes from the rhythm of the paragraph. The short sentences with elided verbs become shorter and sharper in sound, until the narrative ends in an abrupt way as the characters pull away from each other before reaching a physical climax. Just as the orgasm moves through Agone's body, the text runs through the reader's body. So, dreaming also expands the site of the reader's body by allowing it to transgress its own boundaries through experiencing the limits of the character's body.

After the anti-climax, Abhor surprisingly reappears and says, "I went outside into morning's beginning" (Acker, *Empire* 140). This awakening suggests that the whole scene with Agone was just a dream. The sudden ending of the chapter and the shift in narration in the next one reinforces this hypothesis. The dream world and storyworld are temporary dwellings from which the dreamer/reader can abruptly awaken. The fortune teller's prediction ("Your body straining into her will waken you." (Acker, *Empire* 118)) also points to the fact that Abhor was awakened by Agone's near-climax. The process of penetrating the body's skin with the dream brings the body toward a climax without reaching orgasm – that is, without crossing the body's limit, but stretching it, seemingly in control of the body's borders.

Secondly, in *Empire*, abstract dreams become concrete by being tattooed on the skin. Because "the tattooist has to follow the body" (Friedman 18), the dream is shaped by the body. This could be seen as a metaphor for how dreams are influenced by lived experiences. Abhor points to the relationship between Agone's body and the tattoo:

> The first colour was red. The first colour was blood. The ship's sails were crimson. Blood makes the body move. Blood made the ship's body move. Blood changed the inhuman winds into human breath. Agone sang with the pain. The crimson streams of the winds were the roses surrounding the ship. (Acker, *Empire* 139)

Just like blood makes the body move, the red ink/blood makes the tattooed ship's body move. This symbolizes the projection of embodied memories into one's dream world. Grosz points out how "it is problematic to see the body as a blank, passive page, a neutral 'medium' or signifier for the inscription of a text" (156). Each person's body enters into a unique, symbiotic relationship with what is carved onto its surface. Ink and blood merge, resulting in a tattooing process in which "dreams are made actual through pain" (Acker, *Empire* 138; Neldner 4). The dream tattoo "living" (Acker, *Empire* 140) on the site of Agone's body is so real that its thorns cause physical pain. In short, due to the figure's connection to the dream realm, the decapitated body of the sailor can easily influence

and shape its boundaries, and vice versa. This illustrates the importance of recognizing the body's unique materiality, while also highlighting the potential of dreams/dreaming/dreamers to impact the body that is their site (Grosz 156). By encouraging an embodied reading experience, dreams draw attention to the possibilities of the non-cis, non-Cartesian body that embraces its nature of being "*a process of materialization*" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 9; emphasis in original).

The Exorgasm as a Portal to the Internal Dream Space in *My Mother: Demonology*

The Exorgasm as a Narrative Technique

In *My Mother: Demonology* (1993) bodies are possessed by different entities in numerous ways. This possession or confinement can be counteracted by exorcising *demons* through the combination of dreaming and masturbating. The ensuing dissolution of the mind/body split enables the dreamer to access a bodily site of resistance, an inner dream space. In its possession/embodiment of the dream character's body, the body of the reader becomes possessed/absorbed by the body of the book, or the site of the novel's dream space.

For Kathy Acker, the (female) orgasm is a language of intensity one can come upon like a dream. "Since the body's […] end isn't transcendence but excrement," the "pure intensity" of the body can be extracted in the form of a stream of language by simultaneously masturbating and writing (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 92; Rickels, "Body Bildung" 168). Nevertheless, Acker describes the two as different writing techniques: "[t]he writings I get from masturbation aren't fantasy narratives" – like the ones derived from dreaming – "but are descriptions of architectures, of space shifts, shifting architectures, opening spaces, closing spaces" (Rickels, "Body Bildung" 169). Yet, *My Mother* implies that the two are connected:

> Being able to come, I decided while touching myself, necessitates being able to relax and enter another world. To come is to dream. I don't know how it is for males. But I just can't come when I need to protect myself from my parents, and this is the time when I need to most. (Acker 43)

The "culture of censorship" in the United States – represented by the protagonist Laure's parents – has resulted in a "*loss of language*" (Colby, "Radical Interiors" 193; Acker*, My Mother* 237; emphasis in original). Georgina Colby argues that in the novel this form of censorship can be resisted by turning to the body and extracting language from within its inner realms ("Radical Interiors" 193). During dreams (and orgasms), the mind – or rationality – departs from the body. As a result, what could be called an *exorgasm* (a portmanteau of exorcism and orgasm) occurs, whereby a portal opens to the "[d]reams run[ning] through [the] skin and veins," allowing desire and writing to "ooze" (Acker*, My Mother* 133; Gajoux and Finch 145) from the body.

Although the exorgasm "[t]extually […] enacts the projection of the corporeal and psychical interior outwards," it is through this purging that the body's interior can become the "site of dream, memory, desire, sexuality and corporeality" (Colby, "Radical Interiors" 192-193). Through the expulsion/abjection of language from the body, the narrator discovers a sense of empowerment in her female body that, as Grosz puts it,

> has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as a formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order (203)

The language leaking from the body refuses "to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical" (Grosz 195) and blurs the lines between the internal and external, the real and imagined. As Claire Finch observes, it is important to acknowledge that "any body can ooze, even if historically porousness tends to be associated with female-identified bodies (with all their penetrability / stabilized against a mythic male impenetrability)" (Gajoux and Finch 145). This perspective adds to Wark's (104) reading of Acker which asserts that any body can penetrate, as the penetration might as well come from a tattoo needle or a strap-on. In this regard, she owes bodily difference more to penetrability than to gender, the asshole or mouth being an equal port of entry into the body as the vagina (Wark 104). This results in an understanding of the bodies in Acker's texts as all being "potentially trans" (Wark 90). So, despite its connection to the female orgasm, the exorgasmic language also fits into a non-cis view of the body. It establishes a boundary around an inner space that is not externally imposed but made on the body's own terms.

The exorgasm gives rise to narratives driven by desire that combine labyrinthine, shifting spaces with fantastical elements, making them feel like dream spaces. This points to the intertwinement of the narrative techniques of dreaming and masturbating. As Wark points out, describing "a body that is not" (172), necessitates a language that is not – that is, which does not conform to conventions and instead examines its possibilities – wherefore, imagination comes into play. As Colby ("Radical Interiors" 197) suggests, the protagonist's labyrinthine travels occur within the domain of the imaginary, as evidenced by the following scene:

> Now I would have to buy a motorcycle to get Hans back. Though I had never had him … I traveled through the countryside … in the countryside … This land is bleak. Gray and a green that is actually gray, flat as a sheet of paper ……..……
> ……...
> Its depths are circular roads, the closest actual thing to which are racetracks within racetracks which have no center …….
>
> Just beyond these depths lay my first stop, a place where motorcycles could be purchased.
>
> […]

> Riding so excited me that I forgot all about Hans.
>
> […]
>
> In the section of my childhood before I had any friends, the architecture of my uniform and school building and all that they named education was static (not subject to time or change), or fascistic. I have destroyed that architecture by dream in which learning is a journey. Chance and desire form the voyage. (Acker, *My Mother* 192-193)

When the narrator leaves behind the static architecture of her childhood for a fluid, irrational and impossible dream space, the narrative becomes driven by chance and desire (Colby, "Radical Interiors" 199). It transitions "from conventional narrative structures […] to language-centred writing and non-conventional grammatical constructions" that more effectively and authentically convey a sensory experience (Colby, *Kathy Acker* 199). The typography – which features numerous ellipses and paragraphs that differ substantially in length – gives the passage a wave-like quality, reminiscent of the undulating nature of the female orgasm.[3] This is exemplified in Acker's *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996):

> While I masturbate, my body says: Here's a rise. The whole surface, ocean, is rippling, a sheet that's metal, wave after wave. (32)
>
> Relaxation's opening the field, but I don't dare – I'm holding back – open to being a rose; a rose unfolds again and again until the nerves drive the flesh into pure nerves; they are – I'm closing again (becoming rigid) – these are the rhythms of the labyrinth. (32-33)

Through the use of repetition ("the countryside") and irregular pauses, the passage in *My Mother* mirrors the opening and closing of a rose or rising and falling of a wave described in *Pussy*. Additionally, *My Mother*'s narrator describes the process of starting and stopping her motorcycle, and how her excitement makes her forget about the object of her quest. Both the narrative and protagonist are led by desire rather than rationality.

The Possessed Body

In *My Mother*, as in *Don Quixote*, the character's bodies are constrained by phallogocentric language and structures. This limitation is shown through the possession of these bodies by other physical and textual bodies. The book's second epigraph, for example, evokes "the property of divisibility" (Hanson 87) of the maternal body.

> My mother began to love at the same moment in her life that she began to search for who she was. This was the moment she met my father. Since my mother felt that she had to be

[3] In her essay "Colette" (1985), Acker describes "[f]emale sexual awakening" as "a process of traveling rather than of arriving coming and stopping" (*Bodies of Work* 155). She points out that the female orgasm has its oscillating or sailing nature in common with the act of dreaming: "The woman comes, but she comes to somewhere only to go somewhere else, as in a dream." (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 155-156). Both dreams and sexuality can cause the self's identity to shift, only to shift again.

> alone in order to find out who she was and might be, she kept abandoning and returning to love.
>
> My mother spoke: (Acker, *My Mother* 3)

As the narrator and the mother have not yet been identified, Fergus E. O'Brien (94) reads the first section of the book as raising the question whether its narrator is still the first narrator or their mother, thereby blurring the distinction between mother and child. According to Kristeva, leaving the womb – the separation of a body from another body, an abjection following the loss of distinction between "I" and an Other who "precedes and possesses" the "I" – is "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (10, 13). So, in the words of Laurence A. Rickels, "[y]our relationship to your own body is always at the same time the relationship to your mother's" ("Body Bildung" 174). This restricts the connection to one's own body and pleasure. Despite their separation, the demon mother always remains present in the child's body, "interioriz[ing] prison" (Acker, *Bodies of Work* 69). As a result of the maternal possession, the narrator reaches a state of non-existence in which she has no language of her own (Acker, *My Mother* 10).

Yet, as the narrator's body matures, the mother cannot control (the borders of) the daughter's body anymore and "an unseen site of rebellion" (Colby, "Radical Interiors" 195; Acker, *My Mother* 10) emerges. By exploring her sexuality through masturbation, the daughter can exorcise the demonic mother. By moving "towards orgasm," a portal opens to a new type of language of wonder in which she can "make [her] body's imaginings actual" (Acker, *My Mother* 10). She tells herself a story which contains sensory descriptions of the natural spaces surrounding her, filled with alliterations and assonances: "*[c]ricket-rustling and fat-bumblebee-buzzing. Filthy flies are fertilizing its pastures*" (Acker, *My Mother* 13; emphasis in original). Still, the narrator believes masturbation to be insufficient and seeks the help of a man "to escape [her] parents" (Acker, *My Mother* 11). She loses her virginity, which allows her to exorcise the demons of her past, releasing a short stream of exorgasmic language: "[i]n me dead blood blushed crimson into the insides of roses and became a living color that's unnameable" (Acker, *My Mother* 14). By having sex (which is linked to the color red) she gets "the authority to be other than red" and instead, she becomes a rebellious "living color" (Acker, *My Mother* 14). The metaphoric language and descriptions of spaces and colors help the reader to visualize the impossible space. Like a demon possessing someone, the reader possesses – or latches onto – the narrator of the novel, literalizing the embodied experience of reading as in *Empire of the Senseless*. The recurring motif of the color red – the color of dreams, nightmares and "of all the journeys which are interior, the color of the hidden flesh, of the depths and recesses of the unconscious," "of rage and violence," "of wildness and of what is as yet unknown" (Acker, *My Mother* 7, 10) – especially contributes to visualizing the fictional world and its dream spaces, immersing and absorbing the reader in it.

Another way in which Laure counteracts the possession of her body caused by parental and patriarchal confinement is by assuming demonic properties herself. Wark writes that Acker's "[g]irls enter masculine identities, penetrate them, through the senses, through the projection of their own penetrability" (149). For Laure, this means that she can take on different forms or enter different bodies by dreaming and reaching toward orgasm. To illustrate, she gets rid of her obsession with and possession by B with the help of a "continual" exorgasm generated by the "Antichrist" (Acker, *My Mother* 151). During their sexual interaction "hundreds of goat-headed devils" "travel into, slap, scratch, even stroke the inner regions of [Laure's] body," triggering the source of the "language of the flesh" (Acker, *My Mother* 151-152) – and triggering a bodily response from the reader through the visceral description. The experience frees her from the "ties" of conventional language and limitations of her female body, as evidenced by her transformation into "an animal by rolling on [her] own back and playing with [her] lower lips" (Acker, *My Mother* 152). Like Justin Gajoux states in his discussion of one of Acker's early writings, the "reference to the animal [...] could be deeply linked to [an] alternative semiotics of desire" in which "tactile and olfactory sensations are suddenly spread, intensified and multiplied" in an attempt "to intervene on the scopic narrow perspective of language organized around the phallus" (Gajoux and Finch 144). Laure's strategy for increasing her pleasure is to repeatedly approach orgasm, only to subsequently relinquish it (Acker, *My Mother* 152). Although female sexuality is often conceptualized as an "uncontainable flow" (Grosz 206), it is through masturbating and working toward failure that Laure learns how to understand and control her own body. She trades her obsession with B for a preoccupation with the body (Acker, *My Mother* 152). In this rational "male world" where there is "no language" for women, Laure has finally found a language she can "speak" (Acker, *My Mother* 168, 152): the language of the body.

Reminiscent of the medicinal properties of dreams in *Don Quixote*, dreams in *My Mother* can heal the body by exorcising (childhood) traumas that possess and restrict it, reinforcing the embodied nature of dreams and their ability to break down the distinction between mind and body. Given that "[m]urder is a dream," the devil can guide the narrator past death to "the source of dreams" – her childhood – which is located in the same bodily site as the "underworld of writing/reading/remembering" (Acker, *My Mother* 35, 24, 265, 80; Rickels, "Devil Father Mine" 84). In so doing, her "body extricates itself" (Kristeva 3) from the border between life and death, allowing her to break free from the restricting ties to her parents. Following her death, the narrator "descend[s] into her dreams" to "the witch's library" (Acker, *My Mother* 261)[4], which houses the language of the body. Long ellipses emerge, along with architectural descriptions ("This beach was also a building") and repetitions ("time passed in which there was no memory") (Acker, *My Mother* 261, 263), instilling within the body of the reader a sensation of being pulled

[4] Acker considers the witch to be a non-authoritarian figure, because, unlike the parent, she "doesn't want to control humans" *(Bodies of Work* 36).

downward by the oozing language through embodied simulation. The sensory intensity of the exorgasmic language in *My Mother* engenders a more immersive experience than in *Don Quixote* and *Empire*, where the reader is continually snapped out of the dream. The narrator cries, grinds her teeth, vomits and finds her childhood back in the interior realm of the body, but becomes stuck there: "I'm now in a dream in and from which it's impossible to move" (Acker, *My Mother* 265, 267): the body as site of the dream/dreamer/dreaming. As Kristeva puts it, "[i]t is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled" (3-4). She uses the "red writing" of her dreams to start over, demonstrating "the liberating possibilities offered by non-rational languages" (Rickels, "Devil Father Mine" 97; O'Brien 123). *My Mother: Demonology* ends with "a reflection of [the narrator's] face before the creation of the world," "as if the novel were the frontal features of a consciousness that precedes the fixity of mind-body splitting" (Acker 268; Harryman 39). So, like in *Don Quixote*, death is not the end. Paradoxically, it is through death and dreams that the narrator can heal and "reinvent herself and get beyond the essentialist indoctrination of her childhood" (O'Brien 74).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Kathy Acker's novels, dreams are not dismissed as mere escapism; rather, they are depicted as having an actual impact on the body. Houen suggests that over the course of Acker's oeuvre, dreams are put in a more "positive" light by having more "biopolitical potentials" (165). At first sight, the pessimistic connection between dreams and death in Acker's novels seems to prove otherwise. Both in *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* and in *My Mother: Demonology*, it is by dying that the protagonists find power and control over their own bodies, reinforcing how there is no hope for female bodies and other abject ones in patriarchal societies. The only viable solution is to die and escape into a dream world. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Acker responds to the feminists criticizing her work because of her pessimistic portrayal of female masochism:

> I feel that this business about positive role models is just as stupid. If you're arguing that the society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? [Laughs.] That implies there's no reason to have this violent struggle. (96)

Hence, pessimism can be necessary to shed light on the confining limitations imposed on female, queer, trans and other abject bodies by phallogocentric structures and language.

However, focusing on the dream-body relation in Acker's work shows how, despite this prevailing pessimism, there is a gradual shift toward a more positive connection to the body throughout the three novels. As the discussion of *Don Quixote* illustrates, transgressive bodies are already present in Acker's novels prior to *Empire of the Senseless*. That being said, Don's multiple deaths, her capitulation to marriage and the narrative's cyclical structure reinforce female powerlessness to a greater extent than in *Empire* and

My Mother. Thus, Acker's work increasingly encourages dreaming up more fluid and queer ways of understanding the body and its relationship to gender, the mind/body split and its surrounding environment. In 1989, Acker articulates her intention to "find more than survival," indicating her interest in "value" (Nicholls 38). By attentively focusing on and listening to the body, new languages can be identified to articulate a queer perspective on the body and challenge the constraints imposed by societal and phallogocentric structures. In her novels, unlike in the real world where "values have disintegrated so that the only value left is life" (Nicholls 38), there are alternative values to be found in death, dreams, myths, wonder, tattooing, orgasm, and so on. In short, reading the body as the site of dreams, dreaming and dreamers in Kathy Acker's writing not only reveals the inextricable intertwinement of dreams and the body in shaping (the reading experience of) her experimental narratives, but also demonstrates the importance of dreaming up novel, non-Cartesian, queer ways of meaning-making.

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Cross-cultural Drama, Tragic Anomalies, and Queered Spaces: The Case of Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995)

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Mostly received as a New World, rebellious re-writing of the Greek myth of Medea, or as a queer and feminist intervention against machismo, Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* actually revisits tragedy with ambiguous codes. Never explicit, the orders and disorders of the play structure plotlines, characterisation, and settings which are difficult to interpret in any single direction. This article argues that the cross-cultural dimension of the second generation of Chicana writers provokes "anomalies", or resistance to any norms: a theatrical experimentation which collapses all previous discourses, however emancipatory they might be, and pushes towards the emergence of collective knowledge through performative experience.

Keywords: cross-cultural drama, Chicana literature, Cherríe Moraga, Medea, re-writing

Between Postmodern Intertextuality and Postcolonial Reclaiming: *The Hungry Woman* as Cross-cultural Drama

Literary experimentations have punctuated the twentieth century, with a particularly marked imperative to "make it new", according to Ezra Pound's injunction. Such an emphasis on revisiting and renewing previous forms, patterns, plots and narrative devices, has arguably reached a form of exhaustion with late postmodernism and its vortex of intertextuality and intermediality. These critiques of the limits of postmodern experimentations have most notably emerged from Marxist (Callinicos, Jameson, Eagleton) and postcolonial (Ekpo) viewpoints. While postmodern forms came with the awareness that everything has already been written and read, or – in the context of drama – performed and watched, resulting in a failure to intervene in structures of power and domination, the situation is arguably different with postcolonial aesthetic interventions. With the agenda of resisting hegemonic discourses, the creation and reception of postcolonial texts have premised a continuity between text and social context, with an eye to reclaiming a sense of community and cultural cohesion. This has often led to experimentations still very much aligned with the aim of referencing the world out there. Drama provides a potentially privileged site of reconnection with social worlds, through its immersion in a material reality of stage, bodies, props, and settings. Postcolonial drama has actually been a source of major inspiration for the theatrical experimentations in the Euro-American world of the 1960s, and 1970s as they were looking

for ways of reinventing rituals bringing communities together. In *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner recalls how "the tendency to transform entertainment into ritual by means of theater had been present in Grotowski almost from the beginning" (160), but sees an acceleration of the prominence of ritualistic meaning when, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, "Western directors looked not only to Asia but to Africa, the Caribbean, and native America" (146). Paying attention to non-European forms became a distinct element of experimentation of the recent decades; it is a form of postmodern intertextuality and intermediality which maintains a strong link with commitments to world change.

By the end of the second millennium A.C., norms had been all the more attacked from all sides since artistic voices emerged from an ever more common experience of diasporic lives. The very distinction between Western and non-Western positionalities was in itself potentially irrelevant, and was certainly destabilised by the transnational turn which took place around 2000 as well. Registering the increasing diversity in writerly profiles, the transnational turn addressed the increase in formal generic hybridity and linguistic code-switching. This was particularly striking in the case of the United States, where migratory trajectories continued to diversify the population: "once the study of literature became engaged with texts by writers both male and female of African, Native, Asian, Mexican and Latin American descent, the roots *and* the routes of American literature, and the histories of those who both produced and populated its texts, became a transnational affair" (Jay 21-22). Formal experimentation was, from 2000 onwards, mostly led by reflections around cultural differences and by practices authored by non-white, non-heteronormative artists.

While studies of postmodernism have tended to minimise issues of context, the transnational turn emerges from poststructuralist thought and acknowledges the central role played by any artist's positionality. However, areas of ambiguity will remain generated by the form itself, regardless of the artist (see De Souza Santos). In this article, I follow the line of flight away from postmodern devices and postcolonial resistance, to ponder on the ambiguities of recycled myth as opposed to the clarity of a political agenda. Transnational drama is particularly illuminating in its circulations away from both "posts" and its exploration of the possible futures of drama. I take as a case-in-point a play by Chicana[1] author and activist Cherríe Moraga. Her *Medea, A Hungry Woman* is a

[1] The terms "Chicano" and "Chicana" designate elements and agents of culture which result from the bilingual and dual legacy of the Southwest of the USA. They evidence a Mexican and Hispanophone influence which has been maintained throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as opposed to what the Manifest Destiny ideology narrates in terms of Anglophone exceptionalism. The Chicano movement of the 1960s has been "taking shape from a cultural and an institutional politics that called for the affirmation of a working-class, Mexican-mestizo heritage" (Calderón and Saldívar 5). Before this 1991 volume edited by Calderón and Saldívar, where they position Chicano culture as "four hundred years of a Mexican-mestizo presence in our borderlands," critical landmarks for Chicano/a culture had been Joseph Sommers's and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto's *Modern Chicano Writers* (1979) and Vernon E. Lattin's *Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (1986). "Chicano" is sometimes spelt "Xicano", as a tribute to Mexican spelling and legacies of Autochthonous languages.

piece of "writing back" as it adapts the myth of Medea to an apocalyptic USA-Mexico border through its Greek and Roman versions by Euripides and Seneca respectively. The re-direction of the classical plotline reveals an emancipatory political agenda, as it stages negotiations between the national and the transnational; but it also operates a deconstruction of plot and character which "queers" conventional codes from a gendered but also cultural point of view, introducing elements of Mexican mythologies and addressing LGBTQA+ discriminations through a linguistic oscillation between English and Spanish.

The play, which was first performed in 1995, has been studied as a central piece in the constitution of a Chicano corpus. Critical attention has been paid to the ambiguities of pre-Columbian references in the context of a feminist play (He, Ramay, but also Moya for Chicana literature in general), as well as within the context of queer performativity (Foster), and of myth-making (Martin-Baron, Straile-Costa). All these readings tended to lend the play an agenda in terms of identitarian claims. However, the transnational dimension of Chicano literatures, as evidenced by Marissa López, can be adapted to a reading of the play as surpassing claims to a united nation under the banner of Aztlán, or to a recovered visibility for non-heteronormative members. I am adopting an approach to Chicano/a literatures which foregrounds not identitarian claims to singularity, but the contemporary fluidities of gender and ethnicity. As I argue, Moraga rewrites one of the archetypal tragedies to outline the importance of transgression as an element of social (dis)order; yet, this tragic transgression of rules functions at all levels, warranting no return to order whatsoever, be it feminist, ethnically inclusive, cosmopolitan, queer or subaltern.

This article is aligned with the considerations of cross-cultural drama practices, as described by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo as they argue that the lens of "cross-cultural" literature not only departs from Eurocentric nationalism, but also considers culture abstractedly from any political borders. In a major paper on cross-cultural practice, published in 2002, Gilbert and Lo describe a necessary attention to be paid to "a process of encounter and negotiation between different cultural sensibilities" (31). Their intervention rests on the instability of combinations and implies a transcending of binary oppositions. My own analysis contends that Moraga's *Medea* can be read not as "redressing the canon", to borrow the phrase from Alisa Solomon's title, but as multiplying zones of confusion which interrogate the borders and contours of any identity. In other words, Moraga's stage is not one where visibility is clarified and the former, or future, social orders restored; instead, the spectators are asked to participate in a "process of distillation strip[ping] the readable signs of culture from the source text" (Gilbert and Lo 47).

A Chicana Medea: Referential (Con)Fusions

On a number of counts, *The Hungry Woman* does away with classical rules; first and foremost, Aristotle's injunction of time and space unity is left far behind. In Moraga's play,

Medea is a midwife and Chicana activist who has been banned by her husband Jasón, ruler of the kingdom of Aztlán; she is sent to the psychiatric ward of a penitentiary. The action on stage alternates between two spaces which also correspond to two time periods: the court, during the hearing in which Medea is banned, where the audience learns about her demise and the decision taken by Jasón to choose a new wife; and the prison in Phoenix, Arizona, where Medea is busy delivering babies, and reduced to being brought food and exchanging trivial cues with her wardens. Yet, because his new wife is barren, Jasón demands Chac-Mool,[2] their son, for himself. Medea kills her son, who was detained in exile with her, in order to prevent such a kidnapping. Medea, the infanticide, the figure of monstrous femininity borrowed from Greek antiquity, is deconstructed through transnational combinations of the here and there, as well as of the now and then. The audience navigates between Aztlán and Arizona, between a time for murder and a time for disgrace. Overlapping of time and space is taken further, as the name of Medea explicitly introduces Ancient Greece, where the infanticidal myth appeared, re-interpreted as a dystopia set in a future, the chaotic and fractious USA. In itself, this device corresponds to a common feature of dystopias, where descriptions of the future are grafted onto reminiscences of known past facts. This has been categorised as "concrete dystopia", which Maria Varsam summarises as "bringing together the past and present, creating thus a continuum in time whereby historical reality is dystopian" (208).

I am not contesting the fact that in *The Hungry Woman*, Medea voices the resistance to patriarchy expressed by the monstrous female infanticide which Medea embodies, here as in former plays (by Seneca, for instance). It is also manifest that the play constructs the Chicano/a identity as embracing both Central and Northern America – caught on the borders between various fragmented versions of a country which are the United States and its Mexican border in a dystopian future.[3] Yet, the clarity of the agenda is oftentimes blurred. Both the text and the performance emphasise a hybridity in linguistic and visual references: the European backdrop is combined with numerous insertions drawn from the Aztec culture. For instance, Medea describes the infanticide through allusions to the myth of La Llorona[4]: "Allí viene La Llorona. / Rivers rising. / Cold-blooded babies at her breast" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 63); "All the babies, they […]'ve turned into the liquid of the river" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 86). The play posits forms of transnationalism which are quite foreign to any political message: it is partial, fragmented and impossibly united within the confines of a single stage.

Here Moraga's writing is aligned with earlier experimentations by Chicana and Chicano writers to reactivate forms of rituals which have been lost and can therefore

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[2] Chac-Mool is a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican deity.

[3] The original production was directed by the playwright herself, Cherríe Moraga, and Adelina Anthony at The Pigott Theater, Stanford University, in May 2005, after years of staged readings and partial stagings. The set and costume concepts were created by Celia Herrera Rodríguez. (Moraga, "Theatre")

[4] La Llorona is a mythical spirit whose ghostly presence has haunted waterways ever since she has drowned her own children, according to the legend.

never be retrieved as operating collective performances, only re-imagined. In the opening pages to his 2000 overview of "Chicano Drama", Jorge Huerta writes:

> The problem, when inventing a mythos, is that you are compressing time. Myths are created through generations of story-telling and cultural logic which gives those stories mythic significance, not through plays or murals on barrio walls. And yet, that is what the Chicana and Chicano writers and artists, composers and poets began to do in the 1960s: create or re-create a Chicano mythos based on Mexican and pre-Columbian heroes and myths. But, apparently lacking historical knowledge of the narratives, some of these artists would conflate images from distinct cultures and time periods. (18)

This can be seen for instance in the recycling of the name of Jason and Medea's son: Chac-Mool, which designates a deity in pre-Columbian America. In a way, Moraga's cross-cultural experimentation is not a choice but a necessity, given the losses of cultural cohesion in the turmoil of colonialism, imperialism, racism and gendered violence.

As part of its straddling of the fence between ancient creeds and contemporary positionalities, the play combines a feminist point of view with the staging of a figure which has long fed Euro-American stereotypes on female hysteria and irrationality. In *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga rewrites the myth of Medea through a gendered approach but cannot erase the connotations around female monstrosity which the figure of Medea brings in its wake – although her infanticide has been included in feminist agendas (see van Zyl Smit). The title plays with the cliché of the hungry/angry woman and introduces an ambiguity which is maintained throughout the text between figurative and literal meaning. The story is known: Medea kills her own children to spite her husband Jasón after he has shunned her and taken another, younger lover. The action has long been seen as a narrative of female madness or hysteria, of villainy and monstrosity, although Euripides also represents the ambiguities of female alienation. Medea is a woman dominated by passion and possibly even unchanneled lust (if a director chooses to emphasise that part of the mythical figure in their production of Seneca's play, for instance). Unsurprisingly, Medea has in turn become in various rewritings a feminist heroine threatening patriarchy, a woman of intelligence and power whose ability to wreak physical violence is robbed from stereotyped virility. In Moraga's play, Medea tells her former husband Jasón: "I'm a big girl, Jasón. I can take care of myself" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 52). Her idiom is that of a streetwise and thick-skinned woman who can stand up for herself. The disjunction between the expected solemnity of the encounter, and the extremely contemporary idiolect of Medea, reveal a strategy of defamiliarisation which keep the "model" myth at a distance but also play with its accumulated layers of intact cultural misogyny.

The expectations of a broad-minded, liberal audience are further betrayed in an encounter between Medea and her son. In a mirrored vortex of destabilised markers, Medea and her son Chac-Mool accuse each other of betrayal, but the verb "turn" can also be heard as carnivalesque topsy-turviness: "CHAC-MOOL. Why you turning on me, Mom? / MEDEA. I think that's the question I have to ask you." (Moraga, *The Hungry*

Woman 84) The following cue concludes in ways that are metatheatrical: "What am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to be, Mom? There's nobody to be" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 84). These sentences sound like the interrogation of any actor looking for a figment of reality, for an exit from the conventions of artifice presiding over the genre of tragedy. The empty place created for the actor to embody any position furthers the reflections carried out in a collection of essays, *Loving in the War Years* (first published 1983), where Moraga writes how "[t]he ancient myth reminds Mexican women that, culturally speaking, there is no mother-woman to manifest who is defined by us outside of patriarchy. We have never had the power to do the defining" (*Loving in the War Years* 147). *The Hungry Woman* proceeds to such "re-defining" through a dramaturgy of combinations and transnational collusions and ultimately, of confusions.

While the play combines Greek myth and Mexican-American dystopia, Moraga also identifies with Indigenous cultures of Central America. In this respect, the artist's positionality brings to the fore notions of authenticity and of ensuing legitimacy as a writer which could interrupt the cross-cultural reading I am carrying out.[5] In the play, the presence of pre-Columbian traditions, figures as both a temptation (of excavating silenced stories) and a risk (of claims to purity). Like *Heart of the Earth*, another play by Moraga which was written in the same months and published simultaneously in 2001, *The Hungry Woman* borrows from Mexican and Aztec mythology. That other play "writes back"[6] to the European canon while scribbling in the margins of American master narratives of conquest. One sees how Cherríe Moraga finds herself caught in an identitarian conundrum, and I suggest that it is through formal hybridity that she avoids the pitfalls of nostalgic folklore, or of retrospective cultural authenticity.[7] She has made a name for herself through gestures of generic blurring (by writing work at the intersection of essays, memoirs, plays, poetry), as well as with a proclamation of the legitimacy of Spanglish, but also by claiming kinship with Chicana writers.[8] Moraga's play is caught in tensions between attempts at ritualizing the Chicana presence in the USA, and the loss of traditional creeds; but also, between a project of writing about female agency in a context of feminist activism, while keeping in mind the stereotypes which still surround female characters on stage. From the Euro-American patriarchal perspective, Medea is

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[5] This has been particularly visible in the case of Indigenous writers, who have written against the grain of the hybridity that Indian, Nigerian, or perhaps most notably Caribbean authors have claimed. See Pérez for the historicity of the emergence of a Chicana voice and authorship.

[6] The phrase itself has been used as the title to their 1989 monograph by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin and become a commonplace concept in postcolonial studies. They were inspired actually, and say so in their introduction, by an article published by Salman Rushdie in *The Times* (July 3rd, 1982) and entitled "The Empire Strikes back with a Vengeance."

[7] In its generic hybridity, Moraga's oeuvre can be compared with that of such Native American authors as Joy Harjo or Louise Erdrich.

[8] She has co-authored the volume *This Bridge Called my Back* (1981) with Gloria Anzaldúa, gathering critical pieces, essays, visual art, testimonies, interviews, all penned by a group of authors whose in-between positionality has expressed itself in innovative literary ways but who have also foregrounded their ethnic belonging.

an anomaly in her behaviour and characterisation; Moraga's rewriting of the plot takes her transgression further, so that the previous order is not restored. Her resistance to *nomos*, or the rule, becomes a matrix for other forms of rebellion. The following section shows how such resonances find a privileged expression in the (de)construction of the dramatic character, as a way to reflect upon anomalous positionalities in general.

Experimenting with Characterisation: Anomalous Typecasting

One of the places where literary experimentation has nested itself in the past decades is characterisation – especially so in drama. While Western theatre has historically relied on types and stereotypes, postmodern authors have markedly exaggerated such expectations and theatrical conventions in order to deconstruct pre-conceived notions of identities. This is visible from the play's subtitle onwards: *A Mexican Medea* sounds like an impossibility, a dramaturgical aporia, or at least as an interrogation of potential circulations of mythologies against a transnational backdrop. This section analyses how experimenting with form does not hinder a signposted interpretation, precisely because the genre of drama allows the author to push characterisation to such absurd limits that this functions as a dismantling of stereotypes.[9] In their analysis of cross-cultural drama, Gilbert and Lo isolate the actors' bodies as loci where the instability of the signifier is evidenced – as they represent both that of the actor on stage, and of the character in the plot, play and performance (47). Gilbert and Lo focus on the role of gender, which a decontextualizing operation efficiently reveals to be "historically constructed rather than determined solely by biology" (47). My argument in this section is that the queerness of the play rests on its collapsing of any stable spatio-temporal framework (as seen in the previous section), but also on subsequent defamiliarisations of pre-construed identities.

The play *The Hungry Woman, A Mexican Medea* affirms the specificities of Native American ontologies by reading a Greek myth through Aztec mythologies, starting with that of the Coatlicue. The unfolding of the plot pushes all references to their limits; identities are collapsed into others, played by the same actor or actress. This is first and foremost achieved by the sharing of roles as indicated in the stage directions. The list of characters indicates that Cihuatateo East "also plays MEDEA's aging Puerto Rican caretaker in the psychiatric hospital", that Cihuatateo North "also plays PRISON GUARD, TATTOO ARTIST and BORDER GUARD", that Cihuatateo South "also plays MEDEA's husband and CHAC-MOOL's father" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 8). The performance co-directed by Moraga[10] made the bold choice of combining the sleekness of Greek dresses with clothing reminiscent of the postures of Aztec statues. Both influences could be seen to complement, but also to cancel, each other, and finally to gesture towards the artificiality of dramatic characterisation. This ambivalence can be seen in a passage

[9] In an interview with *BOMB*, Moraga mentions the major influence which the French so-called "Theatre of the Absurd" had on her, after a class she had attended during her college years (Anthony 60).
[10] With Adelina Anthony at the Pigott Theater, Stanford University, Palo Alto, in May 2005.

where Chac-Mool rejects the guilt, and tragic *amartia*, on the occasion of his mother's injunction to respect his and her blood:

> MEDEA: *(Grabbing him by the shoulders)* You're my land, hijo. Don't you see that? You're my land!
>
> CHAC-MOOL: How is that any different from my father?
>
> MEDEA: Chinga'o! Because I am the Indian, not him! And I am your mother!
>
> CHAC-MOOL: That's not my fault!
>
> (*She freezes*) (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 85)

While the specificities of Medea, the mother, are merged with those of the father ("how is that any different"), Chac-Mool both denies the identitarian claims of Medea ("the Indian", "your mother") and his own role in the play as the tragic figure needing to perform vengeance and to pursue a cycle of violence ("not my fault"). Medea's physical "freezing" suggests an interruption in the expectations of the spectator, a potential failure of the tragic pattern.

If Moraga keeps the motif of matricide from Euripides' play, this stability turns out to be an illusory typecasting. As already suggested, the "Mexican Medea" is called such because of the references to La Llorona, a myth still vivid in Central America and Medea's counterpart of sorts. Moraga's Medea is also Coatlicue[11], a goddess whose face was replaced by two snakes after she was decapitated by her four hundred children – because, and this is a plot specificity in Moraga's play, Medea is killed in return by the ghost of her son, Chac-Mool, at the end of the play. These Native American associations both build a character and further confuse its recognition by the spectator, and even by the other characters on stage. The recognitions (or "anagnoreses", in technically theatrical terms), which are a conventional moment of performance on stage, are blurred in a collapse of boundaries fully identified by theorists of postmodern performance (Schechner 116ff.) but specifically directed at the disintegration of exclusionary representations. Moraga addresses the constructedness of all myths – that of Medea, a "hysterical" and "bad" mother, and that of the Coatlicue, which has been equated by Western thought with human sacrifices and the "horrors" of Mesoamerica (see Contreras) and whose myth is told again in the prelude of act II. This is how we can read the centrality in the play of Quetzalcoatl, a serpent figure whose symbolic meaning is elusive or contradictory, but whose interpretation has to include transformation: "[j]ust as the serpent crawls out of its skin, so are all earthly things and beings subject to

[11] The stage directions to the Prelude read: "*The lights slowly rise on the altar to Coatlicue, the Aztec Goddess of Creation and Destruction. She is an awesome decapitated stone figure. She wears a serpent skirt and a huge necklace of dismembered hands and hearts, with a human skull at its center*." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 9)

transformation" (92); this is how Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez writes about the uses of Quetzalcoatl by the experimental *Teatro Campesino* founded in 1965 in Delano, California and which has been influential for many Chicano writers, Moraga included.[12]

The Hungry Woman orchestrates an accumulation of emphatic representations and descriptions of women, and this very accumulation sends the spectator into a vortex of validations and invalidations of binaries (male/female; heteronormative/non-heteronormative; same/other; known/unknown). This is seen in the location of the play, a borderland where "queer folk were unilaterally sent into exile" after "hierarchies were established between male and female" (6); it is also visible in the opening figure of Coatlicue, appearing at the opening of the performance, contrasting with the titular Medea and true to her Aztec representation, "an awesome decapitated stone figure [wearing] a serpent skirt and a huge necklace of dismembered hands and hearts, with a human skull at its center" (9). This is a hybrid and cross-cultural combination of two myths but also a re-orientation of the reading made of the Coatlicue myth which is aligned with that of Anzaldúa: "unlike the rhetoric of Chicano nationalism, Anzaldúa's brand of new-age feminist nationalism privileges Coatlicue over her son, the Aztec war-god Huitzilopochtli" (Quintana 136). Transnational reconfigurations and superimpositions provoke formal distortions of the tragic modality which, as a result, loses its directionality. The return to order guaranteed both by myth (that of Euripides' and Seneca's *Medea*, where Medea leaves Corinth and returns to her originally programmatic ethnic otherness), and by tragedies (whose structure imposes reparation at the end), is postponed endlessly. This deconstruction of characterisation hacks at essentialism. The play suggests that identities are fluid, that roles are by definition artificial. An extension of these perceptions is the conception of power emerging from the performance. Theatre historian Thomas Postlewait has shown how Elizabethan playwrights have used the theatre to expose the "inherent theatricality" of power, reduced to a performance of itself: a world of rituals and of artifice (Postlewait 100-16). Similarly, Moraga interrogates the domination of power structures which hold onto ritual and institutional role-playing. The tragic transgression associated with Medea is pushed beyond its traditional limits by the playwright here. The very stage becomes a site of land claims and ritualistic retribution.

Queering Spatialities: Dystopian Stages, Tragic Exclusions, Ritualistic Retributions

This section examines how the stage is used by Moraga as a replacement for Indigenous stolen land, and as a site for the materialisation of the reappearance of both geography and of Autochthonous positionalities. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade

[12] A collaborative and politically committed movement, the *Teatro Campesino* emerged during the Chicano civil rights and farmworker movements of the 1960s; it corresponded to a commitment to drama as social and cultural emancipation.

Mohanty (2010) have shown how the notion of the transnational can lay the emphasis on issues of space in relation with power relations (38-42). They crucially connect this first link between space and power with gender, among other factors: "to think the transnational in relation to the inherited uneven geographies of place and space would require holding in tension questions of power, gender, race, and space" (41). In other words, they argue that the spatial turn must be connected with the tools of decolonial theory in order to trace the resistance exerted by marginal positionalities in spaces constructed as dominant (see also Sandoval and De Souza Santos). Indeed, in Moraga's play, Phoenix is called "Tamoachán" by the outcast women, meaning "we seek our home" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 24), belonging is articulated with marginality and claims to space, rather than to dwelling in a circumscribed territory.

Moraga's play takes place in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world in which ethnicities have carved out pieces of the American land in order to entrench themselves in isolated nations, after what is recorded as an "ethnic civil war" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 6). The "playwright's note and setting" reads: "They reside in what remains of Phoenix, Arizona, located in a king of metaphysical border region between Gringolandia (U.S.A.) and Aztlán (Mechicano country). Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 6). This is immediately problematic as drama was born in Greece as a form of communal art, designed as a representation of the nation for the nation, of the community for the community (see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet). This was certainly the case when Euripides and later Seneca wrote their own versions of *Medea*: "Like that of Athens, Roman drama was constituent of a political, social and religious context" (Boyle in Seneca xxvii). One can easily argue of course that in this combination of globalisation and fragmentation the audience will recognise the world we live in currently – Phoenix is here a signifier for a rebirth, however failed, but also the name of a city on the actual map of the United States. Still, the drama fails to associate all actors and the audience around a collective circle; the cross-cultural space in which Moraga works and thinks is also that of a circle irretrievably broken by colonialism and the partial loss of pre-Columbian rituals and languages.

The spatial configuration is indeed set under the sign of exclusion as the stage is constituted by what Medea calls a "ghetto" from which non-heteronormative individuals have been expelled. This is explicitly referenced numerous times: "And we made a kind of gipsy ghetto for ourselves" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 24); "MEDEA: You can't beat Jasón, Luna. Isn't this queer ghetto proof of that?" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 48) and "MEDEA: I want what's best for my son. He'll be forgotten here in this ghetto." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 53) In so doing, the playwright extends, and politicises, the reach of the exclusion generically endured by the tragic protagonist. Indeed, the tragic pattern relies on the exclusion of the figure who has committed *amartia*, or *hubris*, and who must leave the stage either through death (as Agamemnon), or departure (as Oedipus). When Chac-Mool exclaims, "I gotta get outta here" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 74), he

literalises the oppression of the tragic pattern, where the anomalous characters are destined to expulsion and exclusion. In a similar literalisation of figurative meaning, he associates his tragic fate to action ("I can't do this no more, Mom") and to social codes and conventions ("it's not normal") (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 74).

Although Chac-Mool partakes in it, the tragic pattern is heavily gendered and tends to exclude women and queer-identifying characters – starting with Medea but also Luna, her lover. As patriarchy has been confirmed by the power of Jasón, women have been relegated to the kitchens and non-heteronormative subjects have been sent to a limbo on the borders, including a psychiatric ward. This includes Medea herself, and Luna, who live together on the border between the United States and Aztlán, a toponym borrowed from Aztec mythology and corresponding to Mexico (see Arrizón). As a result, the entire performance takes place in a space of exclusion, as if the tragedy had already taken place even before the beginning of this very performance.[13] Moraga probes what it means to adopt tragedy, i.e., the codes of a genre where order is restored after the expulsion, or sacrifice, of the anomalous subjectivity when one is deemed an anomalous subjectivity, a queer Chicana in this particular instance. The play's setting is most often a psychiatric hospital and a prison. This marginal materiality indicates the belatedness against which the action is set: it is too late for freedom or even constrained choices; everything has already happened, and the stage often turns into a mental space of remembering. This situation abolishes the here and now which ought to define and ground drama, in favour of a poetic performance of anamnesis, or remembering, and lamenting impossible changes.

Therefore, in spatial terms as well as in terms of characterisation, a line of transmission and a form of continuity in human experiences end in *The Hungry Woman* – as the main protagonist proclaims herself, "I am the last one to make this crossing, the border has closed behind me" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 46), associating both space and existence, and their common finality. If Moraga "signals the intersections of sexual practices and desires with other kinds of desire, such as investments in political and social transformation and emancipation" (Sugg 139), she also jettisons conceptions of drama as transformative. This has to do with her position both as a transnational subaltern, and Indigenous woman. For Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, the central issue with postcoloniality is that the discipline is grounded in anti-essentialism, while Autochthonous populations have based their claims to sovereignty on native identity but also claims to property, an issue addressed by Medea as she describes "a country that robs land from its daughters to give it to its sons unless of course they turn out to be jotos" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 75), using the Spanish word of abuse for 'gay men'. This, however, has partly been called into question by scholarship around Chicana/o expression, as for instance in the following quote: "whereas for some writers from the 1960s ethnicity figured as an end unto itself in

[13] This recalls Toni Morrison' play entitled *Desdemona* (2012), where the Shakespearean characters (Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Barbary (the nurse)), as well as others, are dwelling in a post-mortem world after the general massacre taking place at the end of *Othello*. It has been mentioned at the beginning of the article.

literary production, contemporary writers examine this same ethnicity with regard to its evolving qualities. No longer conceptualized as static and essentialist in nature, ethnicity is appreciated for its inherent diversity and in particular for its hybridity" (Lomelí, Márquez and Herrera-Sobek 286). In the next section, I examine the connection between Spanglish and corporeality, as emerging from indigeneity and constituting a space where avant-garde dramatical choices are made in order to challenge the role and response of audiences. After characterisation and setting, language is the third element where Medea's tragic transgression finds an extension but also a form of confusion corresponding to the impossibility of formulating clear messages in times of transnational, transcultural, diasporic mobilities and ensuing culture wars.

Audience Response: Eroticism and Collective Knowledge

The use of Spanglish[14] is one of the crucial experimental elements in *The Hungry Woman*. Spanglish – Moraga shared it with Anzaldúa, with whom she collaborated on a number of literary and/or militant projects, proved to be pioneers. There is intense code-switching in the dialogues of *The Hungry Woman*. In this regard, the experimental becomes cross-cultural and transitional, and opens the possibility of translingual drama. The shift to Spanish has a wide range of connotations, from separating masculine and feminine orders and powers to ritualistic moments, where a creolised form of English and Spanish are channelled towards prayers, invocations, incantations: moments when language becomes performative and does what it says. The alternation sometimes marks agreement, in a contiguity which translates to continuity: "LUNA: He can hurt us, Medea. / MEDEA: Yo sé." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 49). Here, Jasón's threatening presence is formulated in English, the tongue of hegemony, while the intimate knowledge of a vulnerable woman is expressed in Spanish.

Such a recurrent combination of the two languages doubles back on my previous analysis both of the in-betweenness of space, and of the deconstructed character. Here, another protean face to the main protagonist can be added, that of the Malinche, who is a character in another play by Cherríe Moraga, entitled *Mathematics of Love* (premiered at the Brava Theater Center, San Francisco in 2017, directed by Cherríe Moraga, and unpublished to this day) and the starting point of a number of reflections in the essay collection *Loving in the War Years*. The translator and interpreter to Hernan Cortes, whose son she bore, the Malinche is an apparently ambivalent figure: she is involved with the intellectual activity of translation, and with sexual submission to the conqueror (see Todorov). She is the very embodiment of cross-culturalism. This figure, and the re-writings it inspired, raise a number of issues in relation to the audience, who will have to belong to the same linguistic universe as Chicanos, in order to be able to

[14] For instance: "Aztlán, how you betrayed me! Y acá me encuentro in this wasteland where yerbas grow bitter for lack of water, my face pressed to the glass of my own revolution like some húerfana abandonada." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 15)

participate fully in the performance. The anti-realistic stance and largely ritualistic dimension of the performance suggest that Moraga is trying to create an active role for the audience to play. Indeed, in an interview with the co-director of the original performance, Adelina Anthony, she expresses her hopes for this dramaturgical experience to pave the way for "a future strategy of survival":

> indigeneity, as limited and faulty as my process is in this regard, is on one level an oppositional position to the nation state of the United States, and on the other level, reclamation of what our people traditionally subscribe to and live by, in terms of values. And when you're talking about that, it's not nostalgic or retroactive, but instead it's trying to see what shapes and forms from the past work for a future strategy of survival and flourishing (Anthony 63)

The choice of theatre appears then as a cultural form which brings the community together and paves the way for a reflection on what the future could be; it is a democratic and collective practice which is a far cry from historical reconstitutions. It is tentative, but collective.

The collective knowledge which emerges from a performance of *The Hungry Woman* will be centred on the resistance offered by the body, and mostly by the vitality of the physical desire of the various characters. I finally contend in this section that looking at past figures is a way for Moraga to retrieve forms of representational eroticism in order to claim one's own intellectual explorations. This is illuminated by Audre Lorde's reflection on the "uses of the erotic":

> As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move towards and through them.
>
> The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (Lorde 9)

Lorde's reflections were known to Moraga, who collaborated with her on a few occasions, starting with the co-foundation of a publishing house, "Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," in 1983 (Barbara Smith was the third co-founder). It is blatant from watching but also reading *The Hungry Woman* that the plot hinges on the physicality of acting. This corporeality is exposed and exhibited with the dancing, the costumes, the lighting. It is also present in the open descriptions of sexual intercourse voiced forth by Luna and Medea: "I don't even tell you what I can testify to in every sheet you drench with your desire. […] My hands vanishing inside you" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 48). A sculptor, Luna becomes an alternative matrix whose creations include Medea herself, transformed under her hands.

This corporeality, which finds its way into the performance, touches upon the specificities of experimentation in drama: an absolute reduction to pure form is made

impossible by the materiality of the stage, by the concrete presence of bodies. Yet, these bodies can also acquire an intense artificiality. To return to the question pertaining to where the experimental is situated, I would argue that it can begin with a performance, by definition something that escapes intention and grapples with the materiality of art as well as its randomness and asperity. This is confirmed in the Americas by the versatility of performative arts from the 1960s to this day, in English-, Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking areas.[15] The material existence of actors on the stage deconstructs discourse, just as the monologue by Luna is pre-empting Jasón's own account of what happened. The text's emphasis on waste, dissolution, discarding ("rot in this wasteland", Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 69) suggests that the various narratives are not only stitched back together, but also flaunted in all of their inadequacies, in all of their pastness, in all of their marginality.

Through engaging with the specific forms of experimenting in the play, we can see how the genres of drama and performance beg questions in terms of diasporic and cross-cultural studies. Literary texts have the ability to work on and through the bodies of readers.[16] On stage, such thoroughness finds a distinct resonance. I have tried to show how experimental Chicana and African American female writers have both claimed a sense of cultural distinctiveness and experiment with various formal strategies towards bridging cultural distance. The experiential gap between "authentic" Autochtonous mythologies and the legacies of centuries of migrations and foreign domination produces formal innovations that both go backwards, and forwards ("The near future of a fictional past, dreamed only in the Chicana imagination" Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 10). In conjuring performative songs and dances, and foregrounding a sacred chorus, the playwright relies on the essence of theatricality, which is to be pure existence, graspable only as a process and experience. Paying attention to the existence and experience of others is what literature and the arts do, thereby bringing awareness to otherness through distortions of ordinary language, and through the exhibition of bodies which are elsewhere excluded, expelled and invisibilised.

[15] One can mention for instance The Living Theatre, Robert Wilson, Augusto Boal or more recently, Usted Está Aquí in Buenos Aires.

[16] Tyler Bradway (2017) has connected the "affective agency" of formal innovation to a specifically queer tradition in literature suggesting this agency reveals "literary form's capacity to work on and through the bodies of readers, immanently restructuring our felt relations to the aesthetic object" (viii). I would like to thank Hannah Van Hove and Tessel Veneboer for the suggestion of such a relevant, final reference.

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The Politics and Poetics of Intermedial Sentimentality in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

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This paper examines Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) through the intersecting frameworks of intermediality, genre theory, and sentimentality to explore how the text enacts a poetics of resistance against systemic anti-Black racism. Rankine's hybrid work mobilizes a lyric essay form that brings together poetry, prose, documentary materials, and visual art, producing what the paper terms *intermedial sentimentality*—a mode of affective communication in which textual and visual forms collaborate to render the lived experience of racialized embodiment both affectively immediate and politically legible. Synthesizing Irina Rajewsky's concept of the media border as an "enabling structure[s]" ("Border Talks" 66) with Lauren Berlant's theorization of the sentimental and the "impasse[s]" (*Cruel Optimism* 199), the analysis demonstrates how intermedial sentimentality transforms private registers of racial injury into collective modes of critique and witnessing. The sentimental—often dismissed as excessive or manipulative—is reconfigured here as a relational and communicative code that fosters identification, discomfort, and critical reflection. By invoking shared cultural scripts of grief and trauma, *Citizen* constructs a sentimental space of resistance that reveals affect as inherently political. *Citizen* resists the spectacle of Black suffering while calling attention to its invisibility. It disrupts simple empathy, creating instead an impasse that implicates the reader in a difficult mode of witnessing by withholding the visual spectacle of Black suffering while textually invoking its somatic reality. In doing so, it forges what Zizi Papacharissi terms "affective publics," linking private experience to collective critique. The paper concludes that Rankine's intermedial sentimentality expands the possibilities of genre and political feeling, positioning *Citizen* as a powerful intervention in both contemporary literature and racial discourse.

Keywords: intermedial sentimentality, sentimentality, lyric essay, hybridity, resistance

> "[Lyric essay] is a form that has always resisted easy classification, and as such, its very definition is an act of resistance."
>
> — LaTanya McQueen, "The Lyric Essay as a Mode of Resistance"

Introduction

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) is a hybrid work that blends poetry, essay, visual imagery, and cultural critique to interrogate the enduring structures of anti-Black racism in contemporary American life. Through its intermedial construction, *Citizen* stages a confrontation with the ways race is lived, mediated, and represented across cultural and institutional registers. Nowhere is this confrontation more palpable than in

Chapter 6, where Rankine writes in memory of Trayvon Martin. In this passage, Rankine evokes the visceral imagery of lynching, describing "the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through" (90). On the opposite page, she juxtaposes this text with an archival photograph from 1930 depicting a white crowd gazing at a tree. However, Rankine uses a cropped version of the image in which the lynched bodies are removed. This intermedial gap—between the text that speaks the violence and the image that erases it—forces the viewer to confront the social mechanisms that allow such violence to be erased or overlooked in American history.

In this sense, the politics of intermediality in *Citizen* refers to the work's capacity to disrupt established media boundaries in order to critique the social and ideological frameworks that sustain racial inequity. As such, *Citizen* offers an incisive case for rethinking the critical potential of intermedial practices. This paper argues that such moments do not merely interrupt the text; they enact what I term *intermedial sentimentality*—a mode in which affective communication emerges through the interplay of textual and visual media. By withholding the visual spectacle of Black suffering while textually invoking its history, Rankine creates a structural rupture that implicates the reader in a difficult mode of witnessing. To theorize this, I propose reading *Citizen* through the lens of the sentimental, grounded in Lauren Berlant's theorization of sentimentality as a "mode of relationality" ("Depressive Realism"). Berlant argues that genres operate on an "affective contract" (*Cruel Optimism* 66), promising to connect readers to historical experience through feeling. However, for marginalized subjects, this promise of national belonging often proves illusory. Rankine mobilizes the sentimental not to offer comfort, but to create what Berlant might term "impasses"—affective interruptions that expose the inadequacy of simple empathy in the face of systemic racism (*Cruel Optimism* 199).

Recent scholarship has illuminated the intermedial strategies of *Citizen* from multiple perspectives. Catherine Gander shows how the juxtaposition of photographic imagery and lyric address produces a topography of disorientation that unsettles normative orientations of whiteness and reconfigures the act of looking itself (519–522). For Gander, *Citizen*'s visual-textual field compels readers to inhabit an uneasy space of visual and ethical accountability (523–525). Mary-Jean Chan has similarly foregrounded *Citizen*'s hybridity, describing it as a work of "lyric hybridity" in which the interplay of poetry, essay, and uncaptioned images generates a "poetics of racial trauma" (162). Chan argues that by refusing interpretive closure, Rankine positions the reader in a mode of ethical responsiveness (149–150). Building on these accounts of disorientation and hybridity, John K. Young has examined the multiple published versions of *Citizen*, demonstrating how even seemingly minor textual and typographic revisions reshape the book's memorial and political force. As Young notes, changes such as the alteration of "black men" in the first edition to "black people" in later versions broaden the scope of racial violence that the text registers. Likewise, typographic and spatial adjustments across editions shift the presentation of racial violence and memory, drawing attention

to the ways the book's material form shapes its engagement with historical violence (10–11).

While Gander emphasizes disorientation, Chan highlights lyric hybridity, and Young foregrounds archival revision, my analysis extends this field by identifying sentimentality as the affective hinge through which *Citizen*'s hybrid strategies operate. In theorizing what I call intermedial sentimentality, I aim to show how Rankine's integration of text, image, and page space translates private registers of racial injury into collective affective contracts, thereby reclaiming the sentimental as a resistant and disruptive structure of relation. I use the term "lyric essay" to describe *Citizen*, as it is a lyrical text that also includes "essayistic qualities in thought and language" (Chan 141). Although there are various classifications, this term has been widely adopted by scholars in discussions of the work (see Askew and Chan).

Intermediality and Genre

To understand how *Citizen* resists conventional literary forms and creates new possibilities for meaning-making, it is essential to examine its intermedial strategies—that is, the ways it brings different media into interaction. *Citizen* not only reconfigures established genre conventions but also challenges assumptions about the boundaries and functions of media themselves. This convergence of forms draws attention to the interpretive role of both genre and mediality, highlighting the need for a theoretical framework that attends to their mutual entanglement.

This paper draws on a selective and focused set of theoretical tools chosen specifically for their ability to elucidate the politics of Rankine's hybridity. For genre theory, the paper is grounded in the understanding of genre as a dynamic, historically contingent mode of reading, as proposed by scholars like Deborah Tall and John D'Agata. In their foundational description, Tall and D'Agata define the lyric essay as a hybrid form that "partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness […] and of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts" (7). Its fragmentary structure and non-linearity mirror the intermedial operations in *Citizen*, where poetic language, visual art, and documentary materials merge to create layered, affective meaning. Judith Kitchen adds that what distinguishes the lyric essay is its "ground"—an underlying coherence that binds its disparate elements into a unified experiential and intellectual whole (118). In this way, genre itself becomes intermedial: a space of convergence between modes, materials, and readerly expectations.

However, to analyze precisely how the visual and textual elements interact within this lyric space, a more specific framework is required. While Lars Elleström offers a broad definition of intermediality as "the phenomenon whereby the properties of all media partly intersect" (4), his formulation remains conceptually diffuse for a text that relies heavily on the friction between distinct forms. For this reason, this analysis relies on the work of Irina Rajewsky, particularly her argument that intermediality depends on the visibility of borders. Rajewsky's framework is uniquely illuminating for *Citizen* because it

moves beyond the simple observation that media can be mixed. Instead, she argues that the "functioning of intermedial configurations is always based on relations between media […] that are *conventionally perceived as distinct*" (61, emphasis in original). Even though media borders are constructed, Rajewsky insists we must perceive them to understand the artwork; she redefines these borders not as barriers, but as "enabling structures" that allow for "transcending, subverting, probing or highlighting" conventions (64-65).

This focus on the "enabling structure[s]" of the border makes Rajewsky's theory essential for reading *Citizen*. Rankine's project is deeply concerned with the policing of social and racial borders—who belongs, who is visible, and who is recognized as a citizen. By mobilizing Rajewsky's concept, we can see how Rankine uses the formal separation between text and image to mirror the structural separations of race. In *Citizen*, the text and the image do not simply blend into a seamless whole; they often stand in tension, separated by white space or page breaks. This formal gap functions as an "enabling structure[s]": it is the space where the reader feels the dissonance between the caption and the photo, or the lyric voice and the visual evidence. Thus, Rajewsky allows us to read Rankine's formal hybridity not just as an aesthetic experiment, but as a political enactment. Just as the reader must negotiate the "conventionally perceived" borders between the lyric and the picture, they are forced to negotiate the conventional perceptions of Blackness and whiteness that structure the American social landscape. This structural friction prepares the ground for the affective work of the text, leading us to the second theoretical pillar of this analysis: sentimentality.

Sentimentality

Sentimentality has often been treated with suspicion in literary and cultural discourse, burdened by associations with excess, simplicity, and emotional manipulation. As James Chandler observes:

> The sentimental […] has long been regarded in a pejorative light, almost from the moment of its coinage in the mid-eighteenth century. Works that have come to be associated with the nominalized form of the term 'sentimental'—sentimentality—have, over the ensuing two and a half centuries, been considered by many critics to be the very bane of culture. (35)

This critical stance continues to shape how sentimentality is received and evaluated. Burnetts expands this history, noting that the term sentimental is "[n]ow widely used to connote a sense of its own excess, as in the attribute of the 'grossly sentimental' deployed by so many critics," and that it is "often enough deemed manipulative" (*Concept* 2; *Improving* 4). These dismissals obscure the complexity of sentimentality, which, as I argue, can function as a relational and communicative mode—a structure of feeling capable of fostering identification, ethical responsiveness, and political engagement.

My use of the sentimental departs from its conventional stigmatization. Rather than treating it as a sign of excess or manipulation, I understand the sentimental as a

"communicative and relational code" ("DFG Research Training Group")—a structure that facilitates connection between individuals and broader communities. If Rajewsky provides the structural framework for analyzing the borders between media in *Citizen*, Lauren Berlant provides the vocabulary for the affective work that occurs at those borders. Berlant redefines sentimentality, distancing it from its reductive associations with nostalgia or overwrought emotion. As she argues:

> Sentimentality is not just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it's conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering, and it's not just a synonym for a theatre of empathy: it is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers. (Berlant, "Depressive Realism")

It is this sentimental mode of affective communication that is at work in Rankine's *Citizen*. Crucially, Rankine mobilizes sentimentality not as a retreat into emotionalism, but as a politically charged mode of address—one that invites ethical attention and identification without offering resolution or catharsis. This sentimental structure works in concert with the text's intermedial strategies: the juxtaposition of text, visual image, historical documentation, and blank spaces produces moments of affective intensity that are neither purely textual nor purely visual. Instead, they create affective openings or impasses that provoke the reader to pause, feel, and reckon. While empathy is certainly one dimension of this affective response, *Citizen* also produces discomfort, moral self-examination, and a sense of implicated witnessing. In this way, the sentimental in *Citizen* is not nostalgic but disruptive and critical—reclaiming the affective power of sentimental form for a poetics of resistance.

To create a link between genre and sentimentality, as Berlant discusses the historical novel as an affective genre, I see the lyric essay in the same manner. As Berlant argues, genres are defined not only by formal conventions but by "the affective contract they promise," shaping how readers are sutured into historical experience through emotion rather than exposition. In her account of the historical novel, Berlant writes that such genres "[produce] a capacity to sense historical experience in an aesthetic feedback loop," embedding "persons in the historical in ways that only the aesthetic situation could really capture" (*Cruel Optimism* 66). *Citizen* operates through a similar dynamic. While not a historical novel, it creates an atmosphere in which the long afterlife of racial violence is made experientially present. The text does so not by narrating history directly, but by constructing an affective terrain across genres and media—poetic fragments, visual art, documentary traces—that enables readers to inhabit intermedial sentimentality: a mode in which aesthetic and affective forms converge to make systemic violence felt in personal and bodily terms. This sentimentality is not consolatory, but structurally resistant; it activates empathy, discomfort, and recognition through the very interplay of media that constitutes the work's form.

Intermedial Sentimentality in *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Lyric Form, Dissociation, and Structural Violence

Citizen interweaves the personal and the political, drawing connections between individual experiences of racial embodiment and broader structures of social and cultural violence. Through intimate, often second-person narratives, Rankine situates Black subjectivity within a national context shaped by systemic racism and the everyday psychic toll it manifests. The designation "An American Lyric" signals a deliberate engagement with the lyric tradition, which Rankine reconfigures through essayistic techniques such as citation, fragmentation, and reflection. These formal strategies allow the text to oscillate between affective immediacy and analytical distance, enabling it to function simultaneously as poetic expression and cultural critique. Crucially, *Citizen* enacts what Lauren Berlant describes as a "dissociative poetics"—a form that registers the psychic disorientation and affective fragmentation produced by structural violence and racialized life (*On the Inconvenience* 134–35). The text is composed of episodic encounters that begin *in medias res* and resist narrative closure, what Berlant calls "the genre of the encounter," in which "there are no beginnings, only scenes to be in the middle of" (*On the Inconvenience* 134). These lyric fragments reflect a state of ordinary dissociation, which is "a predictable effect and nonexceptional experience of living with, in, and under biopower's structural disciplines and historical aggressions" (*On the Inconvenience* 118). Rankine's poetics thus reflect not just moments of injury but the ongoing affective condition of negotiating visibility, misrecognition, and vulnerability. Dissociation is not pathologized here but rendered as a survival strategy—"a standard clinical referent" that manages psychic overwhelm, wherein "the impersonality of structural violence becomes personal" (*On the Inconvenience* 118). In this way, *Citizen* not only represents racial violence but formally performs the affective atmosphere of living within its ongoing conditions.

The Lyric Essay and Postlyric Poetics

The lyric essay allows Rankine to discuss how the personal is inherently political, as she articulates in her assertion that "there's no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of my political and social world" (Rankine, "The Art of Poetry No. 102"). The lyric essay's flexibility and hybridity provide Rankine with the space to navigate these complex dynamics, blending personal reflection with broader social critique. The concept of "ground," as used by Kitchen, is clearly exemplified in Rankine's *Citizen*. What unifies this work and presents it as a cohesive whole is its resistance to racism, expressed through its content, form, genre, and intermediality. *Citizen* navigates the tension between lyrical expression and factual evidence, resisting the conventions of realist narration and linear coherence. By doing so, Rankine challenges dominant cultural narratives that seek to contain or rationalize racial violence, using formal disruption as a means to expose the fragmented and cumulative nature of racialized experience. This disruption is further

emphasized through the use of fragmentation, varied page designs, and large expanses of white space, all of which contribute to the subversion of normative structures both in literature and society.

Anthony Reed's arguments are highly relevant here, as he states that "Rankine […] [has] developed a 'postlyric' poetics to break the hermeneutic circle of lyricized and racialized reading" (97). Reed also emphasizes that Rankine's "postlyric poetics represent a dialectical interruption of the lyric mode" (97). Reed's concept of postlyric refers to a form of poetic expression that moves beyond the traditional conventions of lyric poetry, particularly in its relationship to the speaker and the subject. This approach forces a re-evaluation of the singular poetic voice and confronts readers with the complexities of Black identity and expression. However, Reed also notes that, for Rankine's previous work titled *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), many critics avoided engaging with the subtitle "an American Lyric" and they have instead classified the work either as "poetic prose" or a "multigenre" text based on the sheer level of integration and interplay between the visual and textual elements that define the work. Reed says that this critical resistance is because Rankine complicates the traditional, universal notion of lyricism, an idea that she figures in "postlyric" form and thus defies the consistent speaking subject and regular legibility assumed to be embedded in the lyric mode (108). Rankine used the same subtitle for *Citizen* which was published exactly a decade after *Lonely*. The understanding of private and public spheres as well as the thought of combining the essay with (American) lyric have radically changed over time.

Affective Publics and the Politics of Address

To further contextualize the intermedial and affective dimensions of *Citizen*, it is useful to consider the text's formation of what Zizi Papacharissi has called "affective publics" (125). These publics are constituted not through rational deliberation but through shared emotional intensities and networked forms of articulation. As Lünenborg explains, affective publics emphasize the "relational, processual, and performative character" of public communication, especially in media-saturated environments (319). *Citizen* participates in and shapes such publics through its polyphonic blending of personal narrative, visual media, and political commentary. The cumulative effect of microaggressions, archival images, and poetic fragments forges a collective affective space in which "individual articulations – which cannot always sharply be distinguished as either private or public – can become starting points of joint action" (Lünenborg 325). In this way, *Citizen* performs a type of affective publicness that bridges private experience and public discourse, generating a shared sensorium of racial injustice and inviting solidarity and critique.

Rankine's mobilization of the second-person pronoun "you" is the central mechanism in this formation of an affective public. By avoiding the lyric "I" in favor of the "you," Rankine detaches the narrative from the specific autobiography of the author and the speaker, instead creating a structural position that accumulates various

anecdotes of microaggressions from diverse sources under a single address. This refusal of the first person serves a distinct political function: it reframes racial injury not as a private, singular event, but as a collective, repetitive condition. The "you" in *Citizen* is not merely a direct address to the reader, but a prosthetic identity into which the reader is sutured. This strategy creates a complex mode of identification for Rankine's potentially diverse audience. For the racialized reader, the "you" offers recognition of shared, often unspoken experience; for the white reader, the "you" forces an embodiment of the racialized subject, compelling them to inhabit the disorientation and psychic exhaustion of navigating anti-Black spaces.

This dynamic is starkly visible in the drugstore scene, where the politics of address collide with the text's intermedial themes of visibility and erasure:

> In line at the drugstore it's finally your turn, and then it's not as [*sic*] he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.
> Oh my God, I didn't see you.
> You must be in a hurry, you offer.
> No, no, no, I really didn't see you. (*Citizen* 77)

Distinct from the material juxtaposition of text and image found elsewhere in the book, in this passage, Rankine enacts intermedial sentimentality by translating a visual failure—the man's inability to see Black presence—into a textual repetition. The interaction begins with the narrator attempting to uphold the affective contract of citizenship through a sentimental gesture of politeness: "You must be in a hurry." This offer attempts to smooth over the rupture and maintain social cohesion. However, the man refuses this repair, insisting, "No, no, no, I really didn't see you." This refusal creates an "impasse"—a moment where the conventional expectations of social recognition break down.

It is here that the connection to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness becomes crucial, moving beyond mere allusion to a structural enactment. Rankine does not simply reference Du Bois; she forces the "you" to perform the affective labor of double consciousness in real-time. The "you" is compelled to see herself through the white man's eyes—as invisible, as an obstacle, as nothing—while simultaneously managing his embarrassment. The "you" attempts to rationalize his behavior ("You must be in a hurry") to alleviate the tension, illustrating the psychic burden placed on the Black subject to maintain the comfort of the white observer, even during an act of erasure.

By forcing the reader to occupy this "you," Rankine creates a collective mode of witnessing. The diverse audience is brought together in this space of the impasse: the white reader is implicated in the "I" that fails to see, yet trapped in the "you" that is unseen, creating a jarring, dissonant empathy. The racialized reader witnesses their own experience externalized and validated. Through this accumulation of experiences under the "you," Rankine transforms the private registers of racial injury into a public, structural critique. The "you" is no longer just one person in a drugstore; it is a collective body subjected to the recurring violence of invisibility. Therefore, *Citizen*'s intermedial poetics

extend resistance into the very structures of form and sentimentality, transforming the act of reading into an ethical confrontation with the limits of recognition in American society.

Intermediality as Political Aesthetics

The intermediality of *Citizen* is not merely an aesthetic choice but serves as a powerful political tool that amplifies the book's critique of systemic racism and its exploration of Black identity. It creates a fragmented, multifaceted representation of the Black experience in the U.S. The juxtaposition of different media elements mirrors the complexity of the issues addressed in the book, illustrating how race, identity, and power are constructed and contested across various cultural and social contexts. Through its use of intermediality, *Citizen* not only articulates the lived realities of racial oppression but also destabilizes conventional forms of representation, thereby opening up new spaces for critical reflection and resistance. The multiple interactions of diverse media inside a single work of art results in an overly complex communicative act, where the meaning is not carried by each individual medium, but by their union and the interplay among them. This is precisely the case with *Citizen*.

Rankine opens the book with a quote from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*: "If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black" (*Citizen*). The line is sharply ironic, suggesting that viewers are often quick to register Blackness as a visual marker while remaining indifferent to the subject's emotional life or humanity. By foregrounding this quote, Rankine signals her engagement with the politics of racial perception, in which Blackness is hypervisible yet affectively illegible within dominant cultural frames. Throughout the book, Rankine uses several images, sometimes juxtaposed with text, sometimes occupying the whole page. The juxtaposition of text and visual image, according to Chan, "creates a space for dialogue between two forms of art – a space which the reader is invited to enter, thus effectively destabilizing the text and preventing what Roland Barthes saw as a kind of interpretive 'closure [that] arrests meaning'" (149-150). She also argues that "by leaving her images uncaptioned, […] Rankine offers an incisive social critique of the use of images in a world dominated by visual media" (Chan, 152). Additionally, the absence of captions heightens the impact of the images by requiring the reader to actively interpret their relationship to the surrounding text. This creates a powerful juxtaposition between the written narrative on one page and the visual image on the following page—each element retaining its own medium-specific qualities while jointly contributing to the construction of meaning. This arrangement exemplifies *Citizen*'s intermedial poetics, where meaning emerges not from either medium alone but from their spatial and conceptual interplay. As Chan notes, such juxtapositions produce a "polyphonic effect" and contribute to a sense of "complex subjectivity" and "the possibility of intimate address and eventual dialogue" (141).

On pages 52 and 53 of *Citizen*, Rankine presents two works by Glenn Ligon, a contemporary African American artist known for his text-based paintings that critically engage with race, identity, and language. These artworks are themselves bi-medial

compositions, combining visual abstraction with verbal text. On the left page, Ligon repeatedly inscribes the phrase "I do not always feel colored," which becomes increasingly illegible as layers of black paint obscure the text. Opposite this, the phrase "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" appears, a direct reference to Zora Neale Hurston's well-known reflection on racial consciousness in her 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (535). By incorporating these already bi-medial works, Rankine does not merely cite Hurston or Ligon; she renders the difficulty of historical transmission. The increasing illegibility of the text on the left page enacts an affective impasse: the viewer struggles to read the sentiment just as the racialized subject struggles to make their interiority legible against the "black noise" of stereotype and projection.

Furthermore, this juxtaposition constructs a sentiment across time, linking Hurston's early 20th-century modernism, Ligon's 1990s conceptualism, and Rankine's 21st-century lyric. This genealogy underscores that the feeling of being "thrown against a sharp white background" is not a singular event but a recursive historical condition. This connects directly to Rankine's assertion that history is not past, but visceral: "Those years of and before me […] accumulate into the hours inside our lives" (89). The "sharp white background" in Ligon's work visually manifests this accumulation, serving as a graphic echo of the "white spaces" Rankine documents throughout the text—such as the drugstore, where the narrator stands out yet remains unseen. In this way, the artwork functions as a pivot between the personal anecdotes of microaggression and the collective history of anti-Blackness. By situating Ligon's visual text within the book's sequence of encounters, Rankine suggests that the "you" in the drugstore is inhabiting the same "sharp white background" that Hurston described decades earlier. Thus, the intermedial inclusion of Ligon's art validates the transhistorical nature of the book's sentimentality: the pain of hyper-visibility is shown to be a shared, enduring structure of feeling that binds the "you" of the present to the "I" of historical memory.

Visual Archives, Erasure, and Historical Memory

In Chapter 6 of *Citizen*, Rankine writes in memory of Trayvon Martin:

> Those years of and before me [*sic*] and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through … (89-90)

In this passage, Rankine vividly evokes the imagery of a lynching, capturing the historical and ongoing violence inflicted upon Black bodies. On the opposite page (91), she juxtaposes this powerful text with an archival image—a black-and-white photograph from 1930. The combination of written and visual forms produces a powerful commentary that transcends the limits of either medium on its own. The photograph depicts a group

of white people gathered in the dark, gazing at a tree that is only partially visible. However, Rankine presents a cropped version of the original photograph, deliberately excluding the lynched Black men from the scene. This cropping fundamentally shifts the image's sentimental operation. By removing the victim, who would typically serve as the image's sentimental center, Rankine denies the reader the release of simple pity or horror. Without the spectacle of the body to consume, the viewer is forced to look instead at the white spectators. We are confronted not with the physical act of murder, but with the social act of witnessing it. The terror of the image shifts from the violence inflicted on the body to the casual curiosity of the crowd. Rankine forces us to engage with the underlying violence by making the white gaze the subject of the photograph. The text supplies the visceral reality of the "throat sliced through," while the image supplies the social machinery that normalizes it. This act of showing by hiding serves as a powerful commentary on the historical erasure of Black lives; the viewer sees exactly what the American public archive has preserved: the white crowd, intact and watching, while the Black subject has been rendered invisible.

Crucially, these distinct media mobilize different affective registers to deepen the confrontation. The lyric text privileges interiority, eliciting a somatic identification with the victim's pain through lines like "the tree inside us" and "a throat sliced through." In contrast, the visual image asserts an evidentiary distance, confronting the reader with the external reality of the social world and the cold, analytical horror of the spectators' gaze. The intermedial sentimentality relies on the friction between these modes: the text pulls the reader inward toward intimate grief, while the image pushes them outward toward critical implication. The combination forces the reader to hold these contradictory affective states—internal empathy and external witnessing—simultaneously.

In this sense, Rankine's intermedial approach mirrors the ways in which the personal and political intersect throughout *Citizen*. The removal of the lynched bodies can be seen as a metaphor for the way Black individuals' personal experiences of trauma and violence—such as Trayvon Martin's—are systematically erased or minimized in the public and political sphere. The private pain of racial violence becomes a political statement, exposing the hidden layers of oppression that remain even when the violence itself is unseen. Rankine's intermedial sentimentality, therefore, does not merely convey racial suffering; it also critiques the societal forces that silence and obscure that suffering. The interplay between text and image in this passage not only evokes emotional and intellectual reflection but also aligns with Rankine's broader aim to blend the personal and the political, making the invisible visible. At the same time, the politics of intermediality in *Citizen* become evident in how Rankine uses the tension between media forms to challenge dominant narratives and power structures.

The use of visual images disrupts the conventional reading experience, forcing readers to confront the fragmented and pervasive nature of racism in everyday life. The images encompass mixed media, performance, and visual art from various time periods

and transnational geographies. Rankine's choice to blend these various forms mirrors the fractured identities and experiences of those who live under the constant pressure of racial scrutiny. This approach not only emphasizes the complexity of the themes but also engages the reader in a more dynamic and participatory manner, inviting them to question and reflect on their own perceptions and biases. The book itself is like a big collage of microaggressions, and everyday experiences. The visual art that Rankine incorporates conveys the unspeakable, including David Hammonds' *The Hood* (1993), which appears on the cover. Additionally, Rankine uses archival media, ranging from a 1930 photograph titled "Public Lynching" to more contemporary images, such as a 2012 photo of Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki's minstrel imitation of Serena Williams.

At the end of *Citizen*, Rankine includes Joseph Mallord William Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*, along with a zoomed-in detail showing fish feeding on the body of a drowned slave. The original painting commemorates the killing of 133 enslaved Africans. By closing the book not with text but with visual art—specifically, a canonical work of European painting recontextualized through the lens of racial violence—Rankine stages an intermedial gesture. The image is not merely illustrative but operates dialogically with the preceding text, extending the book's engagement with racial history into the realm of visual representation. This juxtaposition of poetic narrative and historical painting exemplifies what Chan describes as the book's "lyric hybridity" (162), using visual art to invoke the longue durée of anti-Black violence and to force a reflective, affective confrontation with its enduring legacy. The shift from word to image intensifies the work's intermedial poetics, where meaning emerges through the cumulative interaction of visual and textual forms. As Chan suggests, Rankine's use of these images creates "a poetics of racial trauma" aimed at transforming readers into allies in the ongoing struggle for racial justice (162). In this way, *Citizen* shows how intermediality can add to the inquiry of social themes, such as race and identity. Through the coherent integration of visual art, text, and archival media, Rankine has not only broken usual chains but also forced readers to interact on more than one level with the material, in a deep and active reflection of the pervasive nature of racial injustice.

Citizen merges racial critique and political testimony into a sentimental space of resistance—one shaped by intimate address, historical consciousness, and affective vulnerability, where the private registers of pain and visibility become forms of public, even collective, political expression. As Rebecca Wanzo notes, "[s]entimentality circulates through representations and narratives that become reference points for how people communicate their suffering" (13). *Citizen* engages precisely these reference points, drawing on familiar cultural scripts of grief, empathy, and trauma—while also interrupting them. It is not to universalize or resolve suffering but to stage it as socially embedded and politically unresolved. The reader is not given closure, but is instead drawn into the ongoing work of recognition, witnessing, and response. As Wanzo further argues, "[c]ontemporary sentimental political storytelling often demonstrates a dialectical relationship to representations of excessive suffering—'too much' suffering

can cause people to shy away from the representation, and yet excess also compels" (36). *Citizen*'s intermedial sentimentality navigates this tension carefully, representing the suffering of racialized existence without falling into spectacle.

Conclusion

Citizen's formal hybridity does not merely blur genre boundaries but operates as a deliberate aesthetic strategy to represent the fragmentation, repetition, and accumulation that structure racialized experience in the United States. Intermediality together with sentimentality captures the affective and structural dimensions of anti-Black racism. For example, the juxtaposition of textual and visual elements in key passages enacts a rupture that mirrors the dissonance between public narratives and private experiences of racial violence. The interplay of forms therefore becomes a critical mechanism through which the thematic concerns—such as invisibility, hypervisibility, and historical memory—are made legible. The formal strategies in *Citizen* not only foreground the materiality of media but also intensify the affective and political force of the text's critique. In doing so, *Citizen* mobilizes intermediality and sentimentality to produce a poetics of resistance grounded in the lived realities of racial injustice.

This paper argued that Rankine's use of intermedial sentimentality and a hybrid mixture of genres and forms serves to create social criticism through lyric essay. Thus, she uses intermediality and lyric essay not just as aesthetic choices, but as potent political tools. *Citizen: An American Lyric* embodies resistance against racism through its content, form, genre, and intermediality, representing a long-standing experience in the U.S. Rather than offering the sentimental as consolation, Rankine's work reclaims it as a mode of critical relation—a way of forging connection through shared vulnerability, discomfort, and recognition. Rankine's work goes beyond the confines of genre or medium, opening new possibilities for critical reflection and resistance, which extend far beyond the traditional function of medial boundaries. In doing so, *Citizen* not only critiques the conditions of racial injustice but also models a transformed mode of political feeling—one that insists on visibility, responsiveness, and collective responsibility. This approach forces readers to engage with the material on multiple levels, encouraging them to confront the pervasive nature of racial injustice and to question dominant narratives.

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On the Act and Forms of Writing Grief: Paul Stephenson in Conversation about *Hard Drive*

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(transcribed by Xavier Houtave)

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Paul Stephenson is a poet, teacher and researcher whose debut collection *Hard Drive* (2023) was shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award 2024. In this collection, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through affectionate, humorous and formally adventurous poems. In this conversation, Stephenson shares his thoughts on the experimental strategies used in his poetry, reflecting on the act and forms of writing grief. The interview took place on 18 November 2024 during an English Literature class at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Hannah Van Hove introduced the author to the students in the audience and prepared and asked the questions. Students were invited to ask questions at the end of the interview. Xavier Houtave subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Hannah Van Hove.

Keywords: Paul Stephenson, *Hard Drive*, grief, writing process, experimental writing

Introduction

Paul Stephenson is a poet, teacher, and researcher who was born in the UK and is based in Brussels. He has written three poetry pamphlets and has published in various esteemed journals, including *Magma*, *Poetry London*, *The Rialto,* and *Poetry Review*. His debut collection *Hard Drive*, the work on which this conversation focuses, was published by Carcanet in 2023 and was shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award 2024. In this collection, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through poems that are affectionate, adventurous, often humorous, and a beautiful testament to an enduring relationship. Poetic form is central throughout as Stephenson experiments with patterns, established forms, and the use of constraints to craft a wonderful reflection on grief in all its guises.

This interview originally took place on 18 November 2024 during a class in the context of the "Literature in English: From the Middle Ages to the Present" Bachelor course taught by Prof. Elisabeth Bekers at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Hannah Van Hove introduced the author to the students in the audience and prepared and asked the questions. Students were invited to ask questions at the end of the interview. Xavier Houtave subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Hannah Van Hove. After editing the interview, Van Hove posed two final questions to Stephenson,

who reacted to them via an email exchange in November 2025, and these questions and answers close the interview.

Interview

Hannah Van Hove: Welcome, Paul. I was reading *Hard Drive* this weekend and was deeply moved. You manage to catch a very particular sense of grief and loss. It's never simple to discuss or write about these things, but your collection opens up new ways of talking about them. I wanted to start off by asking you about the form of the collection as a whole. How did you conceive of shaping the collection?

Paul Stephenson: Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. Yes, the book is a big one—128 pages, whereas most debut collections are closer to 60 pages. When you're shaping a pamphlet of 25 or 30 pages, it's one thing. But shaping a collection of this size is pretty daunting. So what I tried to do was cluster the poems so they were kind of 'movements', like they would be in a piece of music, I suppose. Or chapters in a novel. And to some extent, it reads like a novel because there's a linear narrative. And as I was putting the poems together, it just seemed logical to order them chronologically, almost, so that there were these episodes, these thematic episodes: first, the immediate aftermath with the visiting of a mortuary, second, dealing with the bureaucracy and the ample death administration, the rituals you have to go through, attending a crematorium, collecting ashes, that kind of thing. Then, third, emptying an apartment, putting things in storage, cataloguing, and clearing out. All of these things seemed like little, almost mini pamphlets in themselves. And all of them are full of people, like characters in a soap opera of death. The book was just going to be those first three sections, and I thought maybe a second collection would explore revisiting the relationship. But then my poet friends in my workshop group said, no, we need to know more about the relationship, the back story. So that's what I ended up doing in the second half of the book: we go back in time, we revisit the couple, the tensions of a long-term relationship, cohabitation, travel, etc.

As I was revisiting the manuscript and editing it with the publisher, I thought, actually, there are quite a lot of poems here about the act of writing grief, and the questions of ethics and legitimacy around it. What does it mean to write something so personal and put it out into the world, the book as a product and commodity? It was something I was very aware of as I was writing some poems. So that last section of the collection explores the act of writing around loss and grief. It just seemed natural to tell a story through poems, basically. Rather than have a kind of hotchpotch or random ordering.

Hannah Van Hove: Yes, I hadn't read a poetry collection that uses a narrative arc like that in a long time. As a reader, it really does feel like you're taken on a journey by the speaker of the poems... I'd love to dive deeper into your relationship with form. The cover alone hints at formal experimentation—the visible acrostic, for instance—and within the

collection you employ, experiment and play with a wide range of poetic forms: pantoums, haiku, prose poems, blackout poetry, etc. So, to start off with a very general question, how do you find the form of a poem? Do you consciously choose form first when you sit down to write a poem? Does it come later, as you're writing and editing? And going from the level of one particular poem to the plurality of forms within the book, how do you see this collection's relationship towards form as a whole?

Paul Stephenson: Thanks, that's a great question. Yeah, I mean, I love form. Some of my first published poems appeared in the experimental anthology entitled *Adventures in Form* back in 2011 from Penned in the Margins. I've always wanted to experiment, being quite influenced by the French experimental Oulipian poets and their use of constraints; I think using limitations, conceits, and rules can force us into places that we wouldn't normally go if we were just writing without any kind of guidance on what we're doing. So, I think form is really interesting, not only to vary the shape, alter the dynamics and the tone, but also to visually mix things up. For example, one of the poems in the collection entitled "The Hymn of Him" was written using only three-letter words ending in "p." That kind of tight constraint shaped the content and tone in ways I couldn't have predicted. I didn't know what the poem was going to be, and I didn't know what the emotional impact of that poem would be. Some bits are funny, some bits are sad. Some words we don't understand, but make meaning from sound.

I think it's interesting to be conscious of forms—sonnets, sestinas, pantoums—but I also like to play with them, break the rules a little bit, not always adhere so strictly, …. I use a lot of repetition. I think the poems are quite musical, some of them. I employ anaphora—having the same word at the end of every line—but you can enjamb the lines sometimes, rather than having it end-stopped. One poem, "Relationship a Covered Reservoir," ends every line with the word "water." That repeated word shaped the writing and created tension, forcing me to write into unknown spaces.

But back to your question, no, I never choose a form when I set out with a poem. Sometimes the line length of the first few lines, or the use of refrain and repetition, might suggest a form, and the poem will start pushing in that direction. I sometimes try out different forms of the same poem. And there are times you write to 14 lines—a kind of natural first destination—and then times you want to move on because there is more to say. Sometimes the poem doesn't want stanzas at all.

Hannah Van Hove: To continue thinking about form a little bit more, when I was reading your poem "When we were Jackson Pollock," I was struck by the lines:

> To fill a wall ceiling to floor with the now the instant
> being taken by the automatic the unthinkingness of us
>
> (Stephenson, *Hard Drive* 91)

And I was struck by these particular lines, because I think here—and throughout your collection—there appears to be a paradox, right? A desire to capture a moment in time, the instant, the automatic, the unthinkingness of us, and yet how to do that in an act which is not instant, automatic, unthinking, but requires precisely the opposite? Writing takes time; it's usually not automatic; it requires thought, and you draw awareness to this fact. Earlier, you said you do this explicitly in the last section of your collection, but I think you also do it throughout the book, drawing attention to this tension in the poems, while at the same time, you do succeed, I think, very much in capturing the moment.

So at various points throughout your collection, with "Anglepoise," for example, you create a particular atmosphere, a moment in this kind of everyday domestic space. Also in other poems—I'm thinking of "Hand Puppets (You at Your Youest)" where you anchor a memory of your partner—capturing a moment in the day just so, and I find this very moving, because I can see him for a moment, the way you saw him there. So anyway, I was wondering about your thoughts regarding this tension of how to capture the moment whilst simultaneously staging the capturing of the moment?

Paul Stephenson: Yes, that tension is definitely there... That poem and others like "Anglepoise" or "Hand Puppets (You at Your Youest)" aim to preserve small, domestic moments and events. But you're right, writing is not immediate. It's meditative, contemplative, thought out on the page, but the first draft might actually splurge out after much subconscious contemplation, an idea fermenting.

Regarding the idea of copying a Jackson Pollock with oil paints: I can't think of anything more automatic and free and unreflective. But there is then indeed a paradox, because a lot of the poems are very, very thought out or restructured and crafted. Poetry is like Pollock in a way, isn't it? Insofar as you want it to look natural and effortless, not let the scaffold show. What I wanted to do with the book was to inventorise, catalogue, preserve; there's reportage, sometimes a travel reportage, anecdotes about the kitchen, the living together.

I wanted the book to preserve us, him, his personality, his characteristics. The "Hand Puppets" poem in particular, captures this sense of mischief and childishness of someone, even within a grown adult, the playfulness and the humour—maybe his own personality has impacted my own humour, my own perspective on the world. So the book is an inventory, a hard drive. It contains all the files, all the images, all the memories, all the short little videos that go through your head. I hoped to make something beautiful from all the pain and make something universal that would speak to others. So that when I got rid of all those objects that were in an apartment one day—and many of the poems explore grief through objects, games, and clothes—you're left with a book, and this is ….

Hannah Van Hove: … a distillation of sorts.

Paul Stephenson: A distillation, exactly.

Hannah Van Hove: Let's return for a moment to Jackson Pollock; in *My Painting* from 1947, he famously stated: "I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools, such as easels, palettes, brushes, et cetera. I prefer sticks, straws, knives, a broken fluid plate, or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, or other foreign mass added" (Pollock 1947–1948, 79). How do you perhaps see your relationship to the usual poet's tools? Would you say, similarly to Pollock, that you're moving away from figurative description, in a sense? And what is so attractive about the abstract expressionism of Pollock? How might it relate to your own poetry?

Paul Stephenson: That sense of liberty, of nothing being thought out, nothing being pre-considered, is inspiring in Pollock's work. That immediacy, that freedom that dripping paint gives you. And I mean, can you drip words in the same way? I don't know…

There's a poet, Caroline Bird, who often talks about the process of writing, that you're driving along a road, but you're building the road as you're driving the vehicle, so there is no road ahead. I think that idea of just writing into the void, or into a blank canvas, a blank page, without knowing where you're going, without knowing what the poem is going to be about, without knowing what form it's going to take, and letting something emerge, and then saying: Okay, what do I see? What does this poem want to be? Does it want to be a sonnet? You asked about the form of it. Does it want to be free verse? Does it want to be in stanzas? Does it want to be justified as a box, or is it a prose poem? I love that sense of writing into the void.

Hannah Van Hove: Speaking of Caroline Bird, would you consider her an influence? And what other poets have influenced your work?

Paul Stephenson: Absolutely. Caroline Bird takes a wild idea, like in a poem from her recent collection *Ambush at Still Lake* (Carcanet 2024), about swallowing her child's toys. She lets her imagination go wild and just runs with the ridiculous scenario, and it goes to very dark, comic places. I love the way she takes a seemingly impossible or surreal notion and then takes it seriously and pushes the poem and its possibilities on. Explores it all. Another poet who gave me permission to write was Luke Kennard, who is similarly a kind of surrealist, absurdist poet. I remember reading *The Migraine Hotel* (Salt Publishing, 2009) and going, oh my God, I didn't know you were allowed to do this, you know? It's such a gift when another writer gives you permission to write. Other poets who influenced me are people like e. e. cummings, the modern American poets, Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara, Tony Hoagland, C. D. Wright, and poets who have an expansive kind of style. Though also writers like the experimental, conceptual French poets and prose writers, Renaud Queneau and Georges Perec.

Hannah Van Hove: Do you see yourself writing within a particular lineage?

Paul Stephenson: I honestly don't know. There's a poem in the book called "Starchitect" that's slightly Audenesque, I think, echoing "Funeral Blues"... When I launched the book online, Gregory Woods, former Professor of Gay & Lesbian Studies at Nottingham Trent University, asked if it belonged to the gay literary tradition. I wasn't sure what to reply. Many readers have said, "This speaks to everyone. What's specifically gay about it?" It's true that it's not overtly sexual or physical in the way some queer literature is. It's about a relationship—mundane, loving, complicated. But maybe it's gay in the humour, the perspective, the absurdity. Do we need more death poems? There are so many. I think if you're going to write them, it's best to take a risk. Experiment with the form, be funny, play with all the stages of grief. Of course, bereavement is extremely self-indulgent, and what ends up overly sincere doesn't work. But you can find the poetry in what is plain and mundane, the humour hidden within the sorrow.

Hannah Van Hove: The body features prominently in your work—in subtle, ambiguous, and explicit ways. From mortuary scenes to moments of intimacy, from ambiguity to grief. And, thinking earlier of Jackson Pollock, I was reminded of how he uses the force of his whole body quite often when he's painting. And I was thinking about the body in relation to the collection and how it features so much, and in such kind of odd ways. You have the weight of the body's brain that you talk about in one of your poems, for example, the body before and after death, but also bodies in relationship. How do you see the role of the body in your work?

Paul Stephenson: I hadn't thought of it that way, but yes, the body is there—both living and dead. Sitting on doorsteps, trains, in the forest, in a swimming pool. There's that ambiguity again. But it's not necessarily a conscious choice. Maybe it's more about physical presence, absence, and the spaces we inhabit together. Poets like Andrew McMillan write directly and very convincingly about the body. I suppose mine is more about embodiment in relational and emotional terms.

The poem, "Your Brain," was perhaps my most risk-taking poem in that I didn't put it in the manuscript at the beginning because I thought, is this in bad taste? Should I use this? I used some found material in it, official, formal material, documents, and I did erasure and blackouts. And that was a poem where I just started with the weight of the brain and just kept going, very much inspired by Layli Long Soldier's book *Whereas* (Graywolf Press 2017), where they write a sentence and then qualify it further, expand out, keeping adding details and specificity. Like a slinky, those helical spring toys that "walk" with a mind of their own, cascading down the stairs. So you have a line, and then you go beyond that line, and then you clarify it a bit further, add another position, and very quickly a poem takes shape of its own volition. Suddenly, I was journeying somewhere I didn't know I was going, and the poem kept on for 2–3 pages.

Hannah Van Hove: In your poem "Boy at the End of a Long Narrow Garden," the last stanza starts:

> With a feint-ruled notebook and pen to hand, a can of warm cider by his feet,
> at the very far end of a long narrow lawned garden the boy writes, writing
> words that are legible only to him. (Stephenson, *Hard Drive* 85)

I wondered about the position of the speaker here, away from all the people in the house, surrounded by the silent foxgloves in the garden, and about legibility. In particular, I wondered about how you might see your own identity as a writer, formed on the outskirts, away from the busy house full of people. What is perhaps so important about being on the periphery? Does it equal being away from noise, for example? Or how do you see it? And what about legibility? Why are the words only legible to the boy in the garden in this poem? Or, talking more generally, could you speak to the idea of legibility? What does it mean for your work?

Paul Stephenson: That image comes from observing someone writing—someone who liked to isolate himself while writing. I often write by hand, and frankly, I can't read half of what I write, and I'm not sure he could. So there's the literal illegibility of a frantically written diary of prose.

But also metaphorical: how much of ourselves do we reveal? How much do readers truly understand? Do we want them to be able to read and decipher everything? There's something empowering about being on the periphery—away from the noise—just as there is being on the margins of a page, a place, a group of people.

Hannah Van Hove: I was also thinking of what you were talking about earlier in terms of the categorisation of gay literature, which has historically occupied a peripheral position…

Paul Stephenson: Yes, there's so much in contemporary publishing, both fiction and poetry, that's very much about identity, be it your own family heritage, migration, illness, experience of social and political life, sexual identity, etc. When I did those first three pamphlets, I never thought to use gay or LGBTQIA+, at all, because it didn't seem relevant to the work.

Since then, things have shifted socially and in publishing. So when it came to the production and the marketing of this book, it probably was useful to label it. Publishers have to sell books and need to find a way to communicate the premise of a book in an easily graspable way. But it's more than a book about a gay relationship, it's about a relationship, about love and loss and friendship. In that sense, I think it merits a broader readership as it speaks to anybody who has lost someone close.

Yes, I think as poets, generally, we are fairly peripheral. We're sitting on the margins and observing, aren't we? We're taking a scalpel to everyday life, and we've got a sort

of hyper-vision. We're trying to condense the bizarreness of the things we see. So, I think we're like this by nature. And of course, as they say half-jokingly, nobody buys poetry. So we're peripheral anyway. Although actually, Caroline Bird came to the Poetry in Aldeburgh festival I was involved with last week and read in a cinema with 243 people. And she got up on stage and said, oh my God, it's like being in a parallel universe where everyone loves poetry! Yeah, so I don't think being peripheral is too bad. It's probably a good place to be.

Hannah Van Hove: Absolutely. Could we hear "Nurture" before we open up to questions from the audience?

Paul Stephenson: Sure. This is a poem I really had fun with. I didn't know where it would take me.

[*Reads* "Nurture"]

Audience Question: Why "tomato"?

Paul Stephenson: Get yourself a constraint. Pick a vegetable. Try the same exercise with aubergine or cauliflower. I dare you.

Audience question: How do you know when a poem is done?

Paul Stephenson: Great question. It's like a Rubik's cube—change one word, the whole thing shifts. Sometimes you put the poem in a drawer for a while. Then revisit with fresh eyes. See what stands out. Try different forms. What does the poem want to be? Play around. As they say, write drunk, edit sober.

Audience Question: Could you share something from your last chapter, about turning personal material into a commercial product?

Paul Stephenson: Of course. Let me read "Putting It Out There".

[*Reads* "Putting It Out There"]

I was very aware these poems would become a product. They would be marketed and sold. And you can't escape that. But you also have to ask yourself what impact this work will have—on friends, on family, on those left behind. Ultimately, this book is about the living.

Audience Question: When you began writing, was publication on your mind?

Paul Stephenson: Definitely. Especially during Covid, I was pulling it all together and thinking, "I hope I don't get hit by a bus before this gets published." I wanted it to reach people. It was about preserving the relationship, capturing and celebrating the past, the efforts we made together.

I actually submitted two manuscripts to my publisher. One was a best-of from my previous writing, and one was this. They chose this one. And it felt like a culmination—bringing together all the experiments and ideas from the pamphlets and applying them to something deeply personal.

Hannah Van Hove: Thank you, Paul. Let's give you a warm round of applause.

Postscript

Hannah Van Hove: As I was editing this interview, it struck me that I had a similar question to one of the audience members regarding your poem "Nurture", so allow me to pose it here now: What does tomato allow you to do here? And perhaps more generally, what is your relationship towards meaning? I know that's a huge question so let me clarify what I'm getting at: it seems to me there's something about Emily Dickinson's famous line: "tell all the truth but tell it slant" that captures a certain inclination towards meaning in the poems in *Hard Drive*; a sense that you have to approach truth/reality/whatever you want to call it, "slantly", "at an angle"—that, to continue in Dickinson's words, the truth is "Too bright for our infirm Delight" and instead "The Truth must dazzle gradually" (Dickinson)? That perhaps a sideways approach—through repetition, through the use of spacing, through blacking out words, through scoring out words, through elision, or as in "Nurture" and also in the poem "Relationship as Covered Reservoir", through the simultaneous flattening out of a word by using it umpteen times and at the same time, its gathering of a proliferation of meanings, might allow for an approach towards meaning that is indirect, rather than direct.... I wonder whether you could speak a little to this (huge, I know!) idea of meaning and/or truth?

Paul Stephenson: Replacing so many words in that poem with "tomato" felt liberating and also rather like a mini-revolt of sorts. I think I was thinking about how we write biographies and about the identity politics that are so ingrained in contemporary poetry. Like in all arts, attention is given to where you are from and how you got there—your trajectory. Everybody is unique, with their own story to tell, so your background is very much your permission to write on certain themes that you have lived and experienced. Authenticity of lived experience is crucial, even if poems may not all be true, but at least speak an emotional truth. But thinking back to myself, I was questioning how much anybody would or should care about the extensive, specific details of my upbringing. Is it that interesting? What if I made up or embellished my biography? Would it matter, and who would know?

Though I've lived abroad for many years, I grew up in what I'd consider quite an ordinary English village, which could be idyllic and pleasant but also stifling and constraining, especially during adolescence when you are going through lots of changes and trying to make sense of the self, perhaps dreaming of escape. Just replacing common, predictable words with "tomato" somehow turned things upside down, made it skewed, topsy-turvy. Some of the things are plausible—watching tomatoes for hours on end, walking around old tomatoes—but others are less so—such as pumping up tomatoes when they go flat. But the conceit enabled me to write on, to find humour and create something visually amusing in the mind's eye.

Importantly, using a random repeat word allowed me to cover stuff up, to write on and around more difficult subject matters by alluding to situations and tensions without tackling them head-on—school, university, early stages of a relationship, etc.

Hannah Van Hove: And lastly, what are you currently working on?

Paul Stephenson: I recently spent a weekend in Paris in the footsteps of Georges Perec. I had realized that 18–20 October 2024 would be 50 years since he wrote *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* [published as *Tentative d'Épuisement d'Un Lieu Parisien* in 1975] for which he sat for several hours over three days, noting down every detail of the people and place, the traffic, the movement, like a cataloguing of all of human life. It was an incredible experience, and the irony was that I thought I would be the only person with the idea. I ended up bumping into writers, journalists, and authors from all over Europe and even the US who had come on a kind of homage to Perec. Such a surprising and uplifting weekend. I'm hoping to write an essay and publish my own Perecian pages [see Stephenson, "A Re-attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris"].

More generally, I'm working on poems exploring togetherness and the complexities of modern love as you get older in a post-pandemic age of apps and technology, where people have had to renegotiate the self. I think the protagonist of "Hard Drive" goes out into the world, beyond bereavement, and finds that relationships are not as easy as when he was younger. Is he looking for the same thing? Does he really want what he wanted before? People, himself included, have 'baggage' from the past, from living and loving. Do we have less emotional capacity as we age? What are the boundaries of friendship, and when does a relationship grow and move beyond an initial encounter and closeness? Have we moved collectively to new non-traditional ways to be with another person(s)?

Hannah Van Hove: Thank you, Paul. It was a real pleasure talking and writing to you about your wonderful debut collection. I wish you all the very best with your new projects!

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On Remembering the Voices of Grenfell: Diana Evans in Conversation About Writing as a Political Tool and *A House for Alice*

Carmijn Gerritsen – Radboud University, Nijmegen

Elisabeth Bekers – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Diana Evans is a Black British writer of British-Nigerian descent. She is the critically acclaimed author of four novels and a recent collection of non-fiction pieces. Her latest novel, *A House for Alice* (2023), interweaves the personal with the socio-political and addresses issues of intergenerational belonging and collective remembrance in the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy of 14 June 2017 in West London. In this conversation, Evans shares her thoughts on the role of literature as a political tool for socio-cultural representation and discusses the genesis of *A House for Alice*. The interview took place on 13 May 2025 and was conducted, transcribed and edited by Carmijn Gerritsen (graduate of the Research MA in Literary Studies at Radboud University in Nijmegen and affiliated researcher at the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings at Vrije Universiteit Brussel) with the help of Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers (Professor of British and Postcolonial Literature at VUB and editor-in-chief of the Black British Women Writers website).

Keywords: contemporary Black British literature, Diana Evans, *A House for Alice*, Grenfell Tower fire, cultural remembrance

Introduction

Diana Evans is an acclaimed author of British and Nigerian descent. Born and raised in London, she spent part of her childhood in Lagos before taking up media studies at the University of Sussex and creative writing at the University of East Anglia. Over the course of her career, she has worked as a dancer, journalist, and poet, exploring the intricacies of music, literature and culture in diverse media outlets, before committing to the writing of realist fiction. A recognised novelist, she has received such prizes as the Betty Trask Award (2005), the Orange Award for New Writers (2006) and the South Bank Sky Arts Award (2018). Her debut novel *26a* (Chatto & Windus 2005) explores the experience of twinhood in the urban landscape of North West London. In her next novel, *The Wonder* (Chatto & Windus 2009), she immerses her readers in the world of dance by focusing on two generations of a family with Jamaican roots, tracing their lives from 1950s Kingston to contemporary London. Evans' third novel, *Ordinary People* (Chatto & Windus 2018), offers an intricate account of parenthood and various social relations and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction (2018) and the Rathbones Folio Prize (2018). Following a similar cast of characters, her latest novel *A House for Alice* (Chatto & Windus 2023) interweaves the personal with the socio-political in light of discussions regarding

intergenerational belonging and collective remembrance in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire in a multicultural corner of North Kensington, West London, on 14 June 2017. The tragic inferno, which claimed the lives of seventy-two inhabitants, was exacerbated by the flammable material on the exterior of the high-rise tower block and remains under investigation to this day. Shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction (2023), the realist novel examines the reverberations of this major incident and a smaller fictional domestic fire on the lives of various Black female characters, alongside their sense of displacement.

Most recently, Evans published her first collection of non-fiction*, I Want to Talk to You: And Other Conversations* (Chatto & Windus 2025), which brings together pieces from the author's career in journalistic and essayistic writing. She has previously held a position as Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and has taught diverse workshops, including a discussion seminar at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) on 28 April 2022, as part of the master course on Black British Women's literature taught by prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers. Evans is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and served on the judging panel of the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2025.

This interview took place on 13 May 2025 on the occasion of the publication *of I Want to Talk to You* and in the context of the academic work by Carmijn Gerritsen, a graduate of the interdisciplinary Research MA in Literary Studies at Radboud University (RU) in Nijmegen who spent the first semester of 2024-25 at VUB's Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC) under the supervision of Prof. dr. Bekers. During her research stay, Gerritsen explored the dynamic interweaving of cultural remembrance and the formally innovative or socio-political affordances of experimental Black British women's writing, in preparation of various talks and her master thesis (supervised by dr. Ruud van den Beuken, Assistant Professor of English Literature at Radboud University). Marking the eighth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster, Gerritsen's thesis "Mnemonic Traces of Grenfell: Mediating Cultural Memories and Literary Experimentation in Contemporary Black British Writing" examines how writers deploy, recast and combine myriad experimental modes of representation across fiction, poetry and drama to mediate cultural memories of Grenfell through an affective lens. Focusing on how hypermediacy and formal innovation inflect processes of remembrance, it explores how a recurring repertoire of approaches, including self-reflexive, documentary, generically hybrid and multimodal means, are bound up with witnessing alongside discussions around activism and belonging. In this interview, which was conducted and edited by Gerritsen and Bekers, Evans discusses her own memorable mediation of the disastrous fire in *A House for Alice* and the role of realist fiction as an instrument for socio-cultural representation.

In the first part of the interview, Evans voices her perspective on contemporary literature as a political tool for bearing witness to difficult events and generating wider recognition for underacknowledged Black cultures. Discussing her own approach to literary experimentation and the construction of realist fiction, Evans comments on her "desire to record" personal and socio-political matters, while acknowledging the need to "almost bend [the truth], twist it, exaggerate it" in order to deliver that truth. She draws

attention to the complex interplay between formal innovation and thematic content that enables her to capture emotional experiences in, for example, her previous novel *Ordinary People*. Although 'the burden of representation' (Mercer 1990) is often placed on postcolonial writers, she explains how the depiction of Black British characters as "mainstream rather than peripheral or marginalised" functions as "an act of love and celebration." The novelist underwrites the affordances of realist fiction in considering the connections between experience, politics and cultural memory.

In the second part of the conversation, Evans elaborates on her novel *A House for Alice* and the 'narrative scaffolding' that enabled her to intertwine the personal with the socio-political while recounting the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Following diverse members of a British-Nigerian family in London, including the eponymous character and her three daughters, the work examines experiences of intergenerational belonging against the background of the wider remembrance of Grenfell, which looms over the tapestry of diverse narrative strands. In the interview, Evans discusses the feeling of personal responsibility which prompted her to document, and reflect on, the disaster and related struggles of displacement from a creative distance. She points out how, in contrast to the objective reflection that historical documentation offers, literary texts hold prominence as modes of representation that can "record painful histories with immediacy and emotion." Underlining the multi-faceted workings of her novel and its inspirations, she discusses the interdependency between her "fiction voice" and "journalism voice" in relation to the powerful role of poetry and narrative form (Evans 2025, 1-2). Evans concludes the interview by reflecting on the celebration of human life in *A House for Alice* and the importance of remembering the community most affected by the Grenfell tragedy.

Interview

Carmijn Gerritsen: Welcome, Diana. Before exploring the intricacies of your fourth and most recent novel *A House for Alice*, a wonderful work which explores the personal along the socio-political, we would like to start the interview by asking you about your specific approach to creative writing. In "The Art of Fiction" (1885), Henry James advises aspiring novelists to "[t]ry to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!". Observation seems to be central to your own creative method, for in your recent non-fiction book *I Want to Talk to You: And Other Conversations*, you describe yourself as "a scribe [...] on the balcony overlooking the spectacle" from the "shadowy outer room" (Evans 2025, 17). Could you elaborate on this image of yourself as an author who documents her observations of the world through the medium of fiction?

Diana Evans: The thing that always brings me to writing, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, is the desire to record. Rather than make stories up, which I do not enjoy, I prefer to use material that is already existing and use it in a way that changes it, in order to say something about the truth of what it is to live. I see myself as an observer and a recorder

of experience, whether that is a personal or wider political experience. It has always been the hard truth that brings me to the page to try and capture something of the truth. However, in order to deliver that truth, you do have to adjust the material. We have to almost bend it, twist is, exaggerate it. Oftentimes I bring in elements of the Gothic or the supernatural to get my sense of things across.

Carmijn Gerritsen: In relation to that, I would like to ask how you go about translating reality into fiction. What do you feel are the challenges and affordances of realist fiction?

Diana Evans: The main challenge is to make sure the work reads as if it is off the page and larger than life. In representing everyday experiences, there is always the risk of being too ordinary. As such, what I sometimes do is to create caricatures or amalgamations of existing people. It is very rare that I will take inspiration from real life and put it directly into a novel. When writing dialogue, for example, if you actually transcribe a real conversation, it can come across as very dull and pedestrian - why would anybody want to read it? Thus, you have to edit it to such an extent that you might edit the realism out of it in order to create a realist portrait. You have to take things out in order to make it seem real, which can be difficult at times. But it is also what makes fiction writing so enjoyable for me, because you are making real life more interesting and magnetic.

Elisabeth Bekers: Is that then also the role of the Gothic and supernatural elements that you include? Do they help you to enhance the realism of the text?

Diana Evans: When I use the Gothic or the supernatural, I am usually trying to encapsulate some kind of extremity of emotion in my characters, where both reality and experience tip over into something that feels as if it is existing in another dimension which has been created in that very moment. For example, in *Ordinary People*, Melissa is experiencing maternal psychosis and her experience of that is an opportunity to create this kind of supernatural edge in the writing. She would start seeing pictures falling off the wall. Her experience of the everyday reality at that point has become too unbearable for an everyday context. In turn, it becomes supernatural. In *A House for Alice*, there is a spectre of a little girl with "hair a flower of upward flames" who haunts the novel – a symbol of the damaged child that lives unresolved in the three sisters' psyches as a result of their troubled upbringing. Such symbols can be more subtle yet more powerful than explicit references, as they constitute a deeper layer of communication and interpretation between the reader and the text. For me, the supernatural and the Gothic cannot exist without realism or real life. I am neither interested in stories that are just fantasy nor narratives which are purely made up.

Elisabeth Bekers: Can we then say that it is not the supernatural or Gothic as such, but rather the political that drives the realism in your writing?

Diana Evans: The realism is political in the sense that I am trying to encapsulate the everyday lives of Black British people. That feels very central to what I am doing, to my larger project or 'master plan'. The realism is very politically motivated because I feel that there is this huge gap, an invisibility of Black characters in the narrative output in the UK. I am trying to close that gap. Part of the reason for revisiting the characters from *Ordinary People* in *A House for Alice* was the desire to achieve a sense of longevity and a greater depth to their life journeys, to cement them in our consciousness, to crystalise them in our memory.

Carmijn Gerritsen: All of your novels explore the experiences of individual racialised characters in contemporary Britain; they focus on how Black Britons experience life in multicultural London. To what extent do you believe the literary representation of Black British life might function as a meaningful form of resistance? Can literature help to promote recognition for Black cultures in today's British society?

Diana Evans: I firmly believe that literature is a really strong component in anti-racist work. My writing is definitely geared towards attempting to combat racism in a way that humanises Black characters. Part of the reason why Black people are not often rendered as part of British culture in mainstream series, films and literature is that they are often represented in a negative light, whether this is in relation to some kind of criminality or pathology around slavery, migration or racism. The theme of race almost strangles the humanity of Black characters. As such, what I am trying to do is to write from the inside. I aim to represent Black experiences in a way that reduces the emphasis on race and allows the characters to just be ordinary human beings. That to me makes my writing an important political tool.

Elisabeth Bekers: I think it is very important that you do that, so that both Black and white readers are presented with a broader range of experiences and perspectives. Do you ever experience the 'burden of representation' in raising awareness for topics that are not sufficiently addressed in contemporary politics and that have remained underexplored in cultural expression? I remember the Trinidadian-Canadian novelist Shani Mootoo telling us how she wished she could write about her dog instead of having to address postcolonial issues.

Diana Evans: I do not actually feel it as a burden. It really is an act of love and celebration as well, because I adore my characters. I think to centralise someone in a work of fiction is an expression of love. I am trying to show a deeper understanding of these characters, so it almost feels like a gift to my community. I do it with love in a way that does not centralise race. As such, I do not feel that I have to write about postcolonialism, multiculturalism, racism and migration. Although those things are an inherent part of what

I am writing about, I do not feel like I have to hit those themes on the head every time I am forming a sentence. I am simply writing from the inside of my characters and that feels like a very pleasurable and natural thing to do, posing my characters as mainstream rather than peripheral or marginalised.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That is a wonderful insight into your approach to creative writing. Up until recently, Black British literature was read primarily sociologically, for the insights it offered into Black British lives. In recent years, however, critics have called for more profound attention to the interplay between content and form in contemporary Black British writing (see Bekers and Cousins 2022). How do you yourself conceive of the interrelationship between literary experimentation and socio-political engagement in your writing?

Diana Evans: I am always interested in experimenting with forms and charting new territory, which is the reason why I draw on elements of the Gothic and the supernatural, to cross or transgress into other genres, and placing political intention or motivation at the heart of it. Toni Morrison does this with *Beloved* (1987), for example, and Octavia Butler with *Kindred* (1979), both novels in which the supernatural or science fiction are deployed to convey and dissect racial trauma. I am very interested in poetry as well and in fusing poetry into my writing – the lyrical expression of something, the attention to rhythm and pace and the suggested meanings between the lines, in the empty space that is never really empty. In addition, bringing in elements of music and movement allows me to make the text move in a way that is almost audible, and physical. I like there to be other presences in the text, beyond the words, which can be interpreted in whatever way as defined by who is reading it. I also read plays and watch films and TV drama to explore ways of broadening or shaping a novel, because I believe it is a form that, while harbouring a classic foundation that is important to me, should at the same time observe and reflect modernity.

Carmijn Gerritsen: There is little doubt about the politics of your most recent novel, *A House for Alice*, in which you explore the disaster that struck in the early hours of 14 June 2017, when a high-rise tower block in West London became engulfed in thick black flames, resulting in the loss of seventy-two lives. The heterodiegetic narrator depicts the Grenfell Tower fire as well as ongoing discussions around its remembrance and related socio-political issues in no uncertain terms, speaking of "a massacre of negligence, a criminal activity, a corporate atrocity, an obliteration of families" (Evans 2023, 11-13). Although socio-political issues are central to your earlier narratives, this particular novel might be viewed as a social document that does not only discuss the fire but is also marked, or perhaps 'haunted,' by the ghosts and memories of Grenfell. Can you tell us what prompted you to write about the Grenfell Tower disaster?

Diana Evans: As a Black British and London-based writer who actually used to live in the area where the fire happened, only a few streets away in a tower block very similar to that, I felt an immediate personal connection to what happened. I felt a sense of absolute dismay and outrage, together with millions of other Londoners. I felt a sense of great injustice, an injustice that was almost actively perpetrated against people who are vulnerable and marginalised. The Grenfell Tower was largely occupied by immigrants as well as the working-class, the elderly and veterans, many of whom have lived in the city for years and decades. In fact, there is an irony in that the tower was situated in an area where there is also a lot of wealth. It felt as if the borough council of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea were only valuing lives that were wealthy or privileged. When it came to parts of the population who were more vulnerable or marginalised, these lives were almost rendered disposable. The residents had been trying to get fire safety improvements done to the building for many years but they had been practically ignored by the council. As such, it was just a huge corporate injustice.

In turn, I felt that there was no way that I could not write about it, in the same way that I wanted to record the election of Barack Obama in *Ordinary People* because he was the first Black US president. Grenfell felt like one of those things that was almost too big to not write about. I felt a personal responsibility to do so. The main challenge in writing about it was trying to find a place to position it in the book that would not completely override the whole novel. I did not want to write a novel about Grenfell. I wanted to write a novel that was set against the backdrop of Grenfell. That is the reason why the fire features in the opening chapter to *A House for Alice* and the recurring ghosts then follow us throughout the book. It becomes the frame for the novel as we start and end there, in the same location, with Michael and Melissa's participation in the monthly silent walk that continues to commemorate and campaign for the disaster.

Carmijn Gerritsen: The dynamic relationship between the personal and the political that marks your earlier writing can also be observed in *A House for Alice*. This interplay between the micro and the macro level, for instance, features in the novel's parallel discussion of the Grenfell Tower fire alongside a smaller fictional blaze which strikes the novel's mixed-race family that very same night. Could you elaborate on your decision to connect these two separate events, a private and a public one?

Diana Evans: I do believe that the personal is always political. I was trying to make a clear statement about that in the novel, particularly in the case of the elderly character of Cornelius, who could be interpreted as a white, patriarchal figure at a moment of downfall, while the world around him, containing the destruction he has had a hand in creating and perpetuating, is also set ablaze. The parallel discussion of the two fires was a way of containing the private, domestic story within the public/political context of Grenfell. In a way, I was trying to simultaneously manage the macro and the micro while bending reality, because there may indeed have been many other smaller fires in the

world during that same night. Within the framework of realist fiction, it is sometimes the strangest things that lend themselves to fiction, and you can make small but significant adjustments to probability to make the narrative work in the way you want it to, with the right muscle and mood.

The process of framing *A House for Alice* in this way was very difficult because it was hard to get the tone right. The opening chapter about Cornelius begins in a very specific space and the biggest challenge was in trying to carry that tight narrative strand outwards towards a much more panoramic scope in the second half of the chapter. In that sense, referring back to your question about form and politics, I was very much experimenting with form here and this felt like a political journey.

Elisabeth Bekers: I think you pulled that off really well because those two strands are integrated into the novel very nicely.

Diana Evans: Thank you. I am glad, because I had to express a kind of palpable anger in that opening chapter. Rather than trusting my initial intuition to refrain from doing so, I had to disregard the rules that I have been taught in order to allow the rage to express itself openly. It is both a personal and public rage at the fact of the disaster, at the level of neglect that allowed it to happen. There was always the risk of the tone becoming too polemical, but I felt that in this case it was necessary.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This combination of different perspectives is a very striking element to the novel. The first chapter focuses on the character of Cornelius, to whose perspectives we only return in a single instance, after which the narrative follows the complex experiences of loss and displacement through the lens of the female characters in the British-Nigerian family as they are found to reconsider their position in Britain after the Grenfell Tower disaster.

Can you tell us how you go about writing about such a tragic event? How do you navigate the emotions involved in writing a story that features such painful memories, memories which might be difficult to put into words? Did you maintain a certain creative or authorial distance?

Diana Evans: I was able to express my distress and dismay about Grenfell through that polemical tone, which simultaneously allowed me to lay out the facts of what happened. My documentation of the disaster felt like some kind of retaliation or defence of the people who suffered as a result of the fire. At the same time, though, the narrator has to have an element of reserve and distance in order to create any type of fiction. I have always found that to be the case in my writing, because the material that I use is often of an extreme emotional content, whether that is dealing with grief, marital breakdown or maternal ambivalence. I am always dealing with hefty emotional material, and the way that I cope with it is by creating a distance in terms of the characters. I will try to

make them similar yet fundamentally different from myself. For example, the character of Melissa in *Ordinary People* is a fashion journalist who could never see herself writing a novel.

I am also aware that when you are writing a novel, you are existing in a time warp. You have to close the world of the novel around you and live almost in a cocoon. This endeavour is a difficult task, but one is that is very necessary to create the world of the novel convincingly. As such, there is a kind of internal distance that you are constructing as well, a distance between the writing self and the everyday self.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That the novel can be understood as a vehicle for our collective outrage over the Grenfell disaster can be seen in the efforts of the character of Melissa to engage with the memorialising of the victims and, as you write, to "witness the crime, to be with her city as it bent" (Evans 2023, 44). In turn, the final pages of the novel describe the monthly silent marches which are held to remember the fire in the surrounding neighbourhood: "They brought with them their green hearts and justice placards. They brought with them silence. When the time came, when the voice called, they moved out into the road and headed slowly for Grenfell Tower, the largest green hearts in front. [...] All of them remembering" (341-342). Could you elaborate on your decision to have the characters engage with activist discussions in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster?

Diana Evans: The characters come into direct contact with Grenfell, when Melissa goes to the site of the tower a few days after the fire, and when she and Michael meet at the silent walk that happens in the local area every month. These are real events that I attended myself, and that is what I mean about wanting to observe and document actual experiences, to describe more than invent, and while inventing, to do so around the solidity of fact. I was witnessing something that I could record and document on that silent walk and on the site of the burnt-out Grenfell Tower. I am literally describing something very directly, while interweaving it into the narrative of *A House for Alice*. That felt like the only way to write about Grenfell. I did not feel like I could write about it from the inside, in terms of writing about the particular lives of people who had lived or died in Grenfell. That felt too close. It would have been crossing a line of sensitivity. As such, I felt that the only way I could make Grenfell existent in the novel was to observe it in a very literal way and to openly express the anger and heartbreak of it.

Elisabeth Bekers: It is interesting that you say that, because I started reading Cornelius as a resident in the tower, before it became clear the novel was showing similar lives in different circumstances, with the tower looming in the background.

Diana Evans: At the same time, the people in the tower are in fact depicted, because a few real names of the victims are mentioned in the novel, including Zainab Chaicour,

Jessica Urbano Ramirez and Khadija Saye. It felt important to have them named and memorialised in that regard, while keeping a kind of respectful and sensitive distance from their inner lives.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This intimate reflection shows how these people are not just victims within a larger group or collective, but rather individuals with their own unique lives, relations and sense of humanity that should be acknowledged. I thought the mention of those who were lost in the Grenfell Tower fire was, indeed, a very striking and important part of the novel.

Diana Evans: One of the most heart-breaking instances of Grenfell was the death of Mary Mendy and her daughter Khadija Saye, a Gambian-British artist who was being celebrated at that year's Venice Biennale for her photography. She was very talented, at the ascent of her career, and she died with her mother that night in the tower. [Becomes emotional.] It upsets me when I talk about it. As you can tell, I really couldn'tt *not* write about Grenfell because of the sheer tragic and historic nature of it.

Elisabeth Bekers: Thank you for sharing your emotions with us. I think our reactions show how important writings about Grenfell such as yours are, because we cannot forget this disaster and its victims. The younger generation will perhaps only learn about this event through fiction, if it is forgotten on a political and public level.

Carmijn Gerritsen: The emotional and sensitive dimensions to ongoing discussions around this tragic event is a matter I am encountering in my own academic research as well. As I am unravelling diverse literary and experimental responses to the Grenfell Tower fire while engaging with them from a particularly distanced and scholarly perspective, I have found myself becoming deeply affected by the pictures, names or descriptions that I come across in representations of the disaster and the various creative works it has generated. They remind us of the violent realities of this event. Rather than an abstract concept or historical event, the emerging narrative around Grenfell becomes concrete once it is being documented, memorialised and mediated on the page.

Diana Evans: That is why writing about Grenfell is so important, because there is always a reserve and objectivity involved in historical documentation. Fiction can represent the specificity of individual human lives in order to record painful histories with immediacy and emotion. That is something straightforward documentation cannot do. That is why I love, and am inspired by, Tolstoy, because he documents intimate human life in the context of large political movements to do with war or political events.

Carmijn Gerritsen: I would like to turn to some thematic questions about *A House for Alice*. While a diversity of socio-political issues shape our understanding of the novel's

characters, the topic of intergenerational belonging seems to be central. Alice, the matriarch of the family who functions as an anchor for her children, seeks a new sense of home in Nigeria in the aftermath of Grenfell and her husband's sudden passing. In relation to this observation, I was struck by the epigraph's reference to Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight" (1979), which features the image of a window framing one's life. What does Walcott's poem mean for you, and how does its presence inform *A House for Alice*?

Diana Evans: I was inspired by various elements of that poem that really spoke to the overall question of diasporic belonging and the kind of feeling I was trying to capture in the novel. Often when I am reading poetry, I am struck by particular lines or moments of precise encapsulation – as if the poet has pinpointed something in my own mind, like a strange, often alarming literary telepathy. I will mark them down and later return to them when they seem to speak directly to the project that I am working on at the time. That is the context in which I read Walcott's poem. The character of Alice is in flight and the poem seemed to perfectly capture elements of her yearning and of her position of being in a country that was not her home. She is trying to create a feeling of home in a place where she does not feel she truly belongs. As such, she is looking at her life through a window pane. I believe Walcott's poem captures the sadness of that.

In a way, I see *A House for Alice* as a representation of Alice's voice. There are moments in the prose, almost undiscernible, when a shift occurs, into a particular voice that might be hers. The text will become slightly non-grammatical and broken, and the tone will change to a non-English, looser one, such as the scene in which Alice and Winifred are walking back from church, or when we are very deeply situated in Alice's mind, alone with her, and she is almost speaking directly to us. I wanted to give voice and visibility to an elderly Black-British character like Alice who has been in the UK for fifty years – someone who is very similar to my mother, someone who is often invisible and absent from the British narrative. It felt really important for her to be very visible. She is in fact visible and audible at the same time.

Carmijn Gerritsen: As you have previously indicated, *A House for Alice* is "preoccupied with the concept of home as a site of international conflict and loss" and "fantasy and dreaming" (Evans 2025, 160). This can be related, for instance, to the character of Alice, who experiences the results of displacement in the socio-political landscape of Britain and seeks the concept of home elsewhere. As the narrator comments: "Her essential wish, though, to return home, had been steadily refuelled by the British months. [...] There was a cold, greedy machine at the centre of the nation. She wanted to be in her country that knew her well" (Evans 2023: 311). Could you discuss this notion of belonging and the concept of home in more detail?

Diana Evans: At the heart of the novel is Alice's desire for home. This yearning for a sense of home also exists in the other characters, who likewise yearn for different places of belonging. Alice's wish therefore functions as a framework for a selection of cross-generational yearnings for places of physical, familial, romantic and spiritual belonging. All the characters in *A House for Alice* are in search of a place where they feel entirely settled and can live in full expression of themselves. That is the fundamental human desire for belonging. I think we all feel that, right? We all desire a place where we can be at peace and be ourselves.

I was attempting to explore that notion across different contexts beyond the concept of geographical place. The question of home is always present in my writing because I myself have always questioned my place in Britain. As I get older, I actually think I feel much more settled in my sense of geographical home, because I have come to adulthood and raised my children here. When I was younger it was very different, because I was frequently questioning my origins and sense of belonging in the UK. This notion has coloured other aspects of my experience in the framework of family, relationships, and parenthood. It will always remain a factor in my thinking.

Carmijn Gerritsen: Indeed, I believe that the concept of home does not have to be found in a specific place but rather within a wider community, for instance. It constitutes a multi-layered topic that can hold a tapestry of different meanings for a variety of people.

With regard to some of these notions, I would like to ask you about the potential inspirations for the novel. As the eighth anniversary of the Grenfell disaster is coming up, it has become clear that the event has generated a wide range of cultural responses, including Jay Bernard's multimodal poetry collection *Surge* (2019), the spoken-word radio drama "Grenfell II" (2019) by George the Poet, Steve McQueen's film *Grenfell* (2023), and Ben Okri's elegy, which was shared only a week after the fire. *A House for Alice* seems to be the first novel to dwell on the ramifications of the fire. How did you find the right narrative structure for the story? Were you in the writing of the novel inspired by any earlier works that have engaged with the remembrance of the fire, or with other tragedies?

Diana Evans: I was not particularly influenced by previous cultural responses to Grenfell. One of the main inspirations behind the structure of *A House for Alice* was Tolstoy's large-scale writing and the way he contains everyday lives within larger political moments. I was also reading a lot of press around Grenfell and that was really useful in my attempt to write about the disaster in a very factual and journalistic way that was reserved and distanced. In addition, I was constantly listening to "Bridge Over Troubled Water", a tribute song to Grenfell by British artists such as Stormzy and Paloma Faith, which was released only a few weeks after the fire. That song was on repeat and helped to keep me connected to the book, exemplifying how music is always something that I am trying to fuse into the narratives I am creating.

More generally, in relation to the topic of dramatic storytelling, Toni Morrison has always been a big influence in the background, because she was often writing about African-American history and historical moments in the context of very specific lives. She is an overarching influence in my work, and the statement she once made, that she writes for black people, is something I very much relate to. Although many other demographics might enjoy it, my writing is targeted towards black readers who I feel have been underfed and misrepresented. In fact, one of the most moving experiences I have had in my writing career is when a husband and wife came up to me after a reading to say that they had truly seen themselves in my novel *Ordinary People*. That is the most important thing for me. I think there is much more ground that I need to cover - it is never-ending work.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This reflection manifests itself really beautifully *in A House for Alice* because the realist novel discusses the cultural and collective remembrance of a tragic event which continues to mark socio-political discussions today. The narrative behind the Grenfell Tower fire should be remembered, commemorated and mediated. It should be granted a form of cultural longevity on the material page.

Diana Evans: There are ongoing debates about what to do with the actual tower and whether to demolish it and construct a monument for the victims. I believe that the building should remain until justice has been served. It is a real bone of contention at the moment, because there are people who would rather just not have it there to remind them. I feel that it would create a possibility for it to be forgotten and for justice to be postponed. The most important thing is that justice must be served.

Carmijn Gerritsen: In relation to your discussion of the complexities of the tragic fire, in the introduction to *I Want to Talk to You*, you distinguish between the affordances of your 'fiction voice' and 'journalism voice' in the writing of your fiction and non-fiction. Whereas the former is "nebulous" and "shadowy", the latter is "direct, conspicuous and definite" in relation to the discussion of subjects which "already had a shape and texture of their own" (Evans 2025, 1-2). When reading *A House for Alice*, both voices appear to be influencing each other. This is illustrated at the beginning of the novel, as realist depictions of the fictional characters are interrelated with images of the Grenfell Tower fire. Could you elaborate on this potential interplay between your journalism voice and your fiction voice?

Diana Evans: That is a very interesting yet difficult question because both voices are very related. They are both distinct and highly interconnected. The writing of fiction is my main vocation, but there is something that I am able to express through journalism that I cannot do in fiction. It is the directness of address that feels crucial for me to use in my work,

because it feeds the fictional voice; it keeps the fictional voice alive. Thus, they have to be kept very distinct from each other, but they are interdependent as well.

Carmijn Gerritsen: You have previously indicated that you have an affinity with the writing of poetry. As the poetic form is often used for the purpose of commemorative writing, and various poems on the topic of Grenfell have already been published, could you comment on the role that your poetic voice may have played in finding a way to remember the fire and its victims?

Diana Evans: The poetic voice is part of the texture of my fictional voice, as I am always trying to write, or naturally tend to do so, in a rhythmic and musical manner, very much preoccupied with language, pace, pattern. And I think that, in a way, poetry is similar to journalism through its tendency towards the direct address. It is a form of direct expression in relation to the articulation of emotion in a particular moment. There is less dependence on a larger structure, which is something which I am always grappling with in writing fiction. The most difficult thing about fiction is the need to find a new engine, the right vehicle, with which to express what you want to say, a concern that is less dominant in the engagement with poetry and journalism. That is why the journalistic voice is an important tool to exercise that muscle.

I actually do not write poetry much anymore, in contrast to the start of my career. In fact, I started as a writer of poetry before deciding on the medium of fiction. I found that the poetic form became too small for me. I wanted to work on a larger canvas.

Carmijn Gerritsen: As a way to wrap up this conversation, I would like to ask you what feelings or observations you hope *A House for Alice* will elicit from your readers?

Diana Evans: The most obvious one is for readers to be reminded of the facts behind Grenfell as well as the human element behind the suffering and heartache. At the same time, though, I do see the novel also as a humorous book. That is probably not obvious to many people, but humour is really important to my writing. I had a lot of fun *writing A House for Alice* and I want the reader to feel the sense of comedy and life that is captured within its pages, alongside the sadness – there is light and there is shade. Overall, I would like the reader to be reminded of the tragedy of Grenfell, while being brought to witness the expanse of human life that has been celebrated within the same book.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That is an evocative and hopeful note to end on regarding the capturing of the multiplicity of human experience. Thank you so much for this lovely conversation and your insightful reflections. It has been truly exciting to listen to you talk about your novel in such a detailed fashion!

Diana Evans: Thank you for some really interesting questions Carmijn and good luck with your thesis!

Elisabeth Bekers: Thank you, Diana, for getting in touch with us! Remember that you are always welcome to come and join us for another conversation if you are travelling to the continent and good luck with the new book that you are writing.

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