Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature

VOL. 50
No 1 (2026)

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES, LITERATURES AND CULTURES
MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY

Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature

EXposuRE.
The Dynamics of Influence in Post-millennial North American Literature and Culture

Guest Editors: Julia Nikiel & Kamil Rusiłowicz

UMCS
50(1) 2026
http://journals.umcs.pl/lsmll

e-ISSN: 2450-4580

Publisher:

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press
MCSU Library building, 3rd floor
ul. Idziego Radziszewskiego 11, 20-031 Lublin, Poland
phone: (081) 537 53 04
e-mail: sekretariat@wydawnictwo.umcs.lublin.pl
https://wydawnictwo.umcs.eu/

Editorial Board

- **Indexing**

Peer Review Process

1. Each article is reviewed by two independent reviewers not affiliated to the place of work of the author of the article or the publisher.
2. For all publications, at least one reviewer's affiliation should be in a different country than the country of the author of the article.
3. Author/s of articles and reviewers do not know each other's identity (double-blind review process).
4. Review is in the written form and contains a clear judgment on whether the article is to be published or rejected.
5. Criteria for qualifying or rejecting publications and the reviewing form are published on the journal's website.
6. Identity of reviewers of particular articles or issues are not revealed, the list of collaborating reviewers is published once a year on the journal's website.
7. To make sure that journal publications meet highest editorial standards and to maintain quality of published research, the journal implements procedures preventing ghostwriting and guest authorship. For articles with multiple authorship, each author's contribution needs to be clearly defined, indicating the contributor of the idea, assumptions, methodology, data, etc , used while preparing the publication. The author submitting the manuscript is solely responsible for that. Any cases of academic dishonesty will be documented and transferred to the institution of the submitting author.

Online Submissions - https://journals umcs pl/lsmll

Registration and login are required to submit items online and to check the status of current submissions.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

EXposuRE. The Dynamics of Influence in Post-millennial North American Literature and Culture

Table of Contents

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Julia Nikiel, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland
Kamil Rusiłowicz, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.1-6

Hit Pause and to Shell with It – Daydreaming Academic Poetics of the Ideal Domicile Amidst the OverEXposuRE of Contemporaneity

Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought.
Henry David Thoreau

In her short story "Roseveine", an American author Rikki Ducornet tells the story of Gabriel Temporal-Lux-Blason, a child genius whose life has been traumatized by Their sadistic father (both the pronoun and the royal capitalization of the protagonist's own choosing). A traveler and a drunk, Gabriel's father, nicknamed the Meat Grinder, torments his son with macabre tales of animals mercilessly tortured and killed in the pursuit of *haute cuisine*. Constantly afraid of becoming Their father's next prey Gabriel withdraws into the safety of Their own mind and starts (day)dreaming up places where They would feel secure. In Their search for an ideal abode, Gabriel conjures a vision of so-called Dreamful Architecture, i.e. a collection of three worldly domiciles – summer, spherical, and airborne – each designed to provide their prospective inhabitant with a safe and peaceful dwelling. The domiciles mark the beginning of Gabriel's search for ideal spaces of rest and healing, and initiate Their inquiry into "[t]he Brain as the Blueprint of a Transcendent Architecture" (Ducornet, 1997, p. 35).

As Gabriel becomes fascinated with seashells, Their interest shifts away from tangible and towards more abstract domiciles. Solid, their beauty matched only by the imperviousness of their "stalwart bodies", the shells Gabriel admires in Their mother's friend's cabinet "cannot be torn from the rocks, not even by the strongest

Julia Nikiel, Katedra Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Instytut Językoznawstawa i Literaturoznawstwa, Wydział Neofilologiczny, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a, 20-031 Lublin, Phone: 0048815372654, julia.nikiel@mail.umcs.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5893-4477
Kamil Rusiłowicz, Katedra Literatury i Kultury Amerykańskiej, Instytut Literaturoznawstwa, Wydział Nauk Humanistycznych, Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Al. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, kamil.rusilowicz@kul.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8324-5115

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

hands, nor in the roughest weather" (p. 41). Allegedly, the shells withstand everything they are exposed too. It comes as no surprise then that at a certain point Gabriel starts dreaming about hiding in and inhabiting a shell. Retreating further and further into Themselves, They come to believe that Their mind is "composed of one nacreous coil, [Their] thoughts sweeping upward under the influence of a lucent tide, the whole protected by a layering of scales" (p. 34). Drifting to sleep in Their scallop-shaped bed, Gabriel finally arrives at a theory about the existence of abstract spaces which house and mirror people's utmost desires. They call these spaces the Dreamful Architecture of Unfulfilled Desire. In order to find one's space, one has to (day)dream it. Once found, the space becomes a form of Ideal Architecture of Fulfilled Desire, the dreamer's Ideal Domicile, a mental sanctuary for the unconscious which promotes further (day)dreaming and prompts its inhabitant to float away from the real world and into reverie.

While, from the very beginning, "Roseveine" reads like a Ducornetesque – surreal, erotic, carnal – rendition of Gaston Bachelard's poetics and theories, it is Gabriel's choice of a shell as Their Ideal Domicile that ultimately positions Ducornet's story within Bachelard's "phenomenology of the imagination", i.e. his exploration of poetic images as lived experiences which resonate in one's consciousness (2014, p. 3), as well as his cognate ruminations on the reciprocity of influence between space and the human self. External and familiar to its inhabitant, adaptive, and aimed at providing atemporal therapeutic seclusion, in Ducornet's story the Ideal Domicile acts as shel(l)ter, a space of reverie, or "creative daydream" (Picart, 1997, p. 60), wherein the dreamer is "struck with wonder" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 1) and "charm[ed]", "disturb[ed]", and "awaken[ed]" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 19) to new realities of being and becoming.

"[A]n empty shell", to quote from Bachelard (2014), "like an empty nest, invites daydreams of refuge" (p. 127). Gabriel's choice to mentally inhabit a Trochus stems not only from Their fascination with Roseveine and her collection of seashells – the conceptual dwelling of the Ideal Domicile, Gabriel argues, is always anchored in a real space known to the inhabitant – but, most importantly, from Their desire for sheltered repose. Small and inconspicuous yet sturdy and beautiful, the Trochus is furnished with a thick layer of mother of pearl and edged "with a handsome series of protective spines, its walls so thick as to be nearly impenetrable" (Ducornet, 1997, p. 49). The shell's impenetrability responds to Gabriel's need for what They call "impervious integument" (p. 37). Apart from being a recognizable and familiar space, the Ideal Domicile is also idiosyncratically mutable. Perfectly attuned to its dweller – "a house that grows in proportion to the growth of the body that inhabits it" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 137) – the Domicile feels like home; it "reveals a known pattern" and, "[a]s in nature, contains a secret and subtle variation known only to the inhabitant and dependent upon [their] own corporeal dimensions and aesthetic or spiritual sensitivities" (Ducornet, 1997,

p. 49). The Domicile's singularity has a soothing and distancing effect on the inhabitant; what is more, the sense of unparalleled comfort it instills ruptures the usual horizontality and continuity of time (Helin et al., 2022, pp. 67–68), thereby freeing the dreamer's mind to delve deeper and reach higher than it normally w/could. Inside the Domicile, Bachelard (1969) avows, "[t]ime is suspended. Time no longer has any yesterday and no longer any tomorrow" (p. 173); the outside "universe", Ducornet (1997) contends, "silenced, diminishes progressively until it vanishes altogether" (p. 49). As a result, the inhabitant finds themselves aware of yet both immune to and dismissive of external circumstances and influence. The consequent tranquility, or, in Bachelard's (1996) terms, "the peace of repose" (p. 18) the inhabitant experiences inside the Domicile, allows them to immerse in dreamful self-reflection, or reverie, opening them up to their own potentialities.

The Ideal Domicile acts as a space of becoming; but not just that, for the fact that it is a shell that functions as the Domicile's exemplar suggests that the space is liminal and the processes it precipitates are replete with contradictions. "The shell", Bachelard (2014) argues, "is a witch's cauldron in which bestiality is brewing", it epitomizes the constant interplay between opposites and especially between "what is hidden and what is manifest. A creature that hides and 'withdraws into its shell' is preparing a 'way out'"; even though seemingly static "in the motionlessness of its shell", the inhabitant is in the process of mustering "temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds, of being" (pp. 128, 131). Inside the Domicile, inhibitions disappear and imagination takes over. Giving in to the reverie, the inhabitant explores their unconscious, "housed" (p. 21), to use Bachelard's term, within the confines of the Domicile, and willingly confronts and reconciles the dialectics of their self, e.g. forgetting yet remembering, (not) knowing yet feeling, wanting yet fearing, being yet becoming anew and other. As the inhabitant prepares to leave their hiding, they come to realize that "[t]he[ir] shell is no longer exterior to the[ir] self, [but has] *become*[…] *the*[ir] *self*" (Ducornet, 1997, p. 50): having domesticated the space of their own mind, the (day)dreamer has become the dream. Bestialized into "a mollusk" (Ducornet, 1997, p. 50), the inhabitant can simultaneously stay inside and come out of the shell – "the part that comes out [forever] contradict[ing] the part that remains inside" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 128) – being both of and not of the world, inside reverie yet awake.

Reverie is the catalyst of change: far from rousing *from* it, the dreamer awakens *through* it. Within the Domicile, the daydreamer reroutes their attention inward, heightening their consciousness and preparing themselves to espouse both the outer and the(ir) inner worlds. "To be awake", Henry David Thoreau (2012) famously argues, "is to be alive" (p. 146). Upon emerging from the Domicile, the dreamer is ready to be-in-the-world and to not just deliberately face but, possibly, also transcend whatever has drawn them into hiding. The shift of attitude towards the outside stems from the change reverie occasions *within* the

dreamer, awakening them to the boundlessness and unfamiliarity of their self, or, in Bachelard's words (2014), their "inner immensity" (p. 203). "Immensity", Bachelard writes, "is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone … dreaming" (p. 203). "[N]atural[ly] inclin[ed]" to "contemplate[…] grandeur" (p. 201), reverie unveils the entirety of being the dreamer holds within. "A world takes form in our reverie", Bachelard maintains, "and this world is ours. This dreamed world", he argues, "teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within our universe" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 8).

A Dreamer, a kosmos (Whitman, 2023, p. 32). Reverie is empowering. Inviting the dreamer to take a step back and prioritize their inner being, it assists the dreamer in (re)discovering their sense of agency and, as a result, helps them acknowledge themselves not as an object of influence but rather as an active and imaginative co-creator of both their own becoming and the world. Still, can the universe within – even one infinite in its immensity – actually challenge the one without? Especially, as is the case with our contemporary world, if the latter is overwhelming in its totality and marked by, among others, instantaneity, simultaneity, overstimulation, progressing dataism, and the twilight of privacy? Put differently, can a musing shell withstand the (shell-)shock of contemporaneity?

Hit pause. It is exactly the ability to take time out, process, and plug oneself back in only once ready that might well function as the greatest act of sabotage and defiance in the post-millennial 24/7 world of overexposure. Whilst no easy task, in a world that never stops nor sleeps, settling down inside the intimacy of a chosen space, be it tangible or intangible, and indulging in reverie not only celebrates individuality and meaningful relationality, so unlike contemporary anonymizing and mostly utilitarian hyperconnectedness, but also holds a promise of (self-)expansion outside the networked and all-consuming system of the now.

Inside the now, mediation replaces meditation, and space – valued only inasmuch as it serves a purpose – is stripped of character and ousted by hubs and non-places. Most "of our experience today", to quote from Richard Kearney (2014), "is processed by digital communication networks and social media", reducing "our culture" to "broadcast and bigness", with "our most private thoughts [exposed] to public view, and … so many places of work and habitation … featureless, climate-controlled and quarantined against surprise" (p. xviii). Acting against these processes requires imagining alternatives and thus opening for oneself (and possibly others) new channels for thinking about and existing in the world. "[P]ursu[ing] that private and very personal becoming no matter how strange and unfamiliar the outcome may prove" takes courage (Danielewski, 2014, p. xv); what is more, it can only be accomplished if one's mind can switch off (the network), rest, and reboot. It is for that very reason, Kearney asserts, that "[n]ow more than ever, we have need for intimacy, secrets, sites of interiority and

contemplation …. Without such nooks and crannies to muse and mope, to linger and loiter, there is nowhere to begin anew. No place for rapt attention" (2014, p. xviii). Chosen as domiciles, the "nooks and crannies" Kearney mentions act as spaces of opposition, fostering qualities antithetical to the now, such as, among others, privacy, detachment, stillness, situatedness, and uniqueness. The greater their versatility, the more diverse the reveries they occasion and, hence, the greater a challenge they pose to the exploitive and homogenizing impulse behind the forces of contemporaneity.

A space of one's choosing, the present-day Ideal Domicile might just as easily be a shell as it might take the form of a blank page or document. Perceived primarily as spurs of poetic imagination, reveries are usually associated with various forms of artistic expression they inspire. Hence, an inhabited page, be it paper or screen, builds expectations of producing not simply written but specifically fictional or lyric reveries. Still, imagination is inextricably bound to the reality that stimulates it, and it is on that account that today the nature of so-called flights of fancy is progressively evolving, leading to their incorporation by none other than academic imagination, as tools for speculative yet critical analysis of contemporary reality, which increasingly eludes and even defies comprehension.

By definition, academia is concerned with advancement and transmission of knowledge; academic endeavors rely on logic and precision and are evidence- and fact-based. Today, however, both knowledge and facts are quickly becoming the stuff of legend. While in theory contemporary reality prioritizes facilitating and universalizing access to information, this same reality systematically hinders people's attempts at the pursuit of knowledge. "We've never been smarter We've never felt stupider", reads one of Douglas Coupland's *Slogans for the 21st Century* (2011–2014). Continuously exposed to ever-accelerating and ever-changing inflow of unprocessable amounts of data, contemporary people, academics included, find it ever more impossible to know anything beyond a shadow of a doubt. While this is not to say that scientific research is ending – and far from that, as every day brings new technological advancements and ground-breaking discoveries – it is a fact [sic!] that more and more scholars, especially in the field of humanities, forsake certainty and come to increasingly appreciate speculation as a means of interpreting what refuses to be known. The trend is discernible not only in the growing academic recognition of genre art forms, i.e. literature, video games, movies, and increased regard for storytelling – whatever the medium – as a viable tool for the unpacking of the now, but also in greater willingness on the part of scholars to give rein to their imagination, crossing, or beastializing disciplines and approaches, balancing rigorous analysis with creative inferences, and opening themselves to the whirlwinds of surprising conclusions.

Whenever a scholar approaches a blank page (or document), they dream of going beyond themselves (and, hopefully, others in the field), exceeding expectations,

and reaching where no one has reached before. While sometimes spiced with a pinch of vanity, the dream is one not of glory but of originality and revelation, using one's quiet musings within the microspace of a page to draw well-versed macroscale conclusions. As the essays collected in this volume demonstrate, it is by listening beyond the everyday buzz, welcoming contradictions, and finding the courage to peek underneath the new normal that scholars can attempt to at least partially expose post-millennial immensity for the meat grinder it is and, in so doing, awaken people *to*, or – by suggesting new ways of conceptualizing and being in the world – maybe even *from* the nightmare of contemporaneity.

References

Bachelard, G. (1969). *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (D. Russell, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Bachelard, G. (2014). *The Poetics of Space* (M. Jolas, Trans.). Penguin Books.

Coupland, D. (2011–2014). *Slogans for the 21st Century*. Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

Danielewski, M. Z. (2014). Foreword. In G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (M. Jolas, Trans.) (pp. vii–xvi). Penguin Books.

Ducornet, R. (1997). Roseveine. In *The Word "Desire"* (pp. 33–51). Henry Holt and Company.

Helin, J., Dahl, M., & Guillet de Monthoux, P. (2022). The power of daydreaming: the aesthetic act of a new beginning. *Culture and Organization*, *28*(1), 64–78. https://doi:10.1080/14759551.2021.1986505

Kearney, R. (2014). Introduction. In G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (M. Jolas, Trans.) (pp. xvii–xxvii). Penguin Books.

Picart, C. J. S. (1997). Metaphysics in Gaston Bachelard's "Reverie." *Human Studies*, *20*(1), 59–73. https://doi:10.1023/A:1005329900220

Thoreau, H. D. (2012). *Walden*. Empire Books.

Whitman, W. (2023). *Leaves of Grass: Unabridged Deathbed Edition with 400 Poems*. SeaWolf Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Marta Miquel-Baldellou, University of Lleida, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.7-19

Revisiting Surveillance and Exposure through Aging Masculinities: Fede Álvarez's *Don't Breathe* as a Contemporary Adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

ABSTRACT
Fede Álvarez's film *Don't Breathe* (2016) and Poe's classic tale "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) present a significant number of intertextualities, which pave the way for approaching Álvarez's film as a contemporary adaptation of Poe's tale. Both narratives comprise pervasive references to the gaze and the act of looking, methods of invigilation and disclosure, the house as a projection of its dweller, and the relevance that age and gender discourses acquire in them. This article offers a comparative analysis of both narratives with the view to prove that Álvarez's film reflects and subverts the dynamics of surveillance and exposure displayed in Poe's original tale.

KEYWORDS
transtextuality; gaze; house; aging; gender

1. Introduction

Fede Álvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016) has been praised as one of the most successful horror films in the last decade, insofar as it has attracted favourable critical acclaim as well as enormous popularity from audiences. Its plot revolves around three Detroit thieves – including Rocky (Jane Levy), Alex (Dylan Minnette), and Money (Daniel Zovatto) – who make a living by breaking into houses. As they learn that Norman Nordstrom (Stephen Lang) conceals a great amount of money in cash after a settlement with a young wealthy woman, who killed his daughter in a car accident, they decide to burglarise his house. When they find out that his intended victim is an elderly blind man, they initially categorise him as an easy prey judging him on the basis of his disability, although they soon realise that his dexterity and extraordinary skills put in jeopardy their intended wicked purposes. Following the release of his film, Álvarez claimed that he envisioned *Don't Breathe* as "an exercise in reversal" (Rife, 2016), inasmuch as he intended to subvert tropes in horror, refusing to resort to supernatural occurrences, depicting

Marta Miquel-Baldellou, Centre de literatures i cultures en anglès, Plaça Víctor Siurana 1, Postal Code 25003, Universitat de Lleida, Lleida, Catalonia, marta.miquel@udl.cat, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9002-5679

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

the house of horror as apparently decent and appealing, and portraying a lethal antagonist as aged and blind. Álvarez's film includes latent references to classic horror films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) given the antagonist's name and the secret concealed in the basement of the house, along with conventions pertaining to slashers, as happens with the character of 'the final girl,' to use Carol Clover's (1992) term, whom Rocky personifies in the film. Nonetheless, the plot, characters and thematization of Álvarez's film mostly bring to mind Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), in which a nameless narrator recalls how he conceived the idea of killing an elderly man in his house as a result of the fact that the narrator could no longer bear the elderly man's vexing eye.

Drawing on Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence, in relation to Poe's classic tale, Álvarez's film is alleged to exemplify the typology of influence whereby the predecessor's work is read in terms of the successor's work (Bloom 1975). In this respect, an analysis of Álvarez's film reveals a series of instances of transtextuality with Poe's tale which pave the way for approaching subjects addressed in both narratives, such as the dynamics of surveillance and exposure, the trope of the house in gothic narratives, and the relevance that the discourses of age and gender acquire in both texts. In terms of the analysis of transtextuality in both works, Gérard Genette's typologies will be used in order to identify instances of intertextuality, architextuality, hypertextuality and metatextuality between both narratives. Besides, the omnipresence of the gaze and the act of looking as a means of subjectification from a Freudian perspective also becomes pervasive in both narratives as an allegory of the battle between factions. Insofar as both textualities mostly develop in a domestic location, the trope of the house as a reflection of its dweller and as legacy of gothic narratives is further developed, while it also explores the dynamics of surveillance and exposure in terms of Michel Foucault and Thomas Mathiesen, along with Alice Marwick's contemporary explanations. Finally, drawing on the entanglement between age and gender, the pulse between the youth and the aged brings to the fore the subject of aging masculinities based on Margaret Gullette's statement (2011) that aging has often been associated with a narrative of decline. Approaching Álvarez's film *Don't Breathe* as an adaptation of Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" will give evidence that contemporary narratives are not only rooted in classic texts, but also contribute to transforming them and updating them in a modern context.

2. In Poe's footsteps: instances of transtextuality

Poe's tale "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Álvarez's film *Don't Breathe* present a series of parallelisms, particularly in terms of plot, characters and themes, which pave the way for providing a comparative analysis, particularly in terms of the dynamics of surveillance and exposure displayed in both narratives. In Poe's tale, a homodiegetic narrator gives his personal account about how he felt constantly

threatened by an elderly man's gaze until he decided to counteract his symbolic power of surveillance by watching him over and slaying him in order to release himself from his overwhelming powers of observation. In Álvarez's film, a gang of three young home intruders break into the home of a war veteran, whom they choose as an easy target, since they categorise him as a vulnerable elderly blind man, although they soon find out that their powers of surveillance are retaliated by his extraordinary skills in spite of his disability. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism and Julia Kristeva's (1986) notion of intertextuality, Gérard Genette (1992) coins the concept of transtextuality, which responds to "all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (p. 83). Textual correspondences between Poe's tale and Álvarez's film display instances of different kinds of transtextuality, comprising intertextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality.

On the basis of Genette's terminology, intertextuality involves direct allusions between texts, which, in relation to Poe's tale and Álvarez's film, mostly amounts to the iconic portrayal of the elderly man's gaze. In Poe's (1978) tale, the narrator puts forward that "one of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it" and "whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees […] I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (p. 792). Correspondingly, Álvarez's film includes numerous visual allusions to this passage in Poe's tale, inasmuch as the elderly man's eyes are continuously portrayed through close-ups and dramatic lightning that draws attention to his gaze. According to Isaac Rooks (2019), the blind man's eyes were also featured prominently in advertisements to publicise *Don't Breathe* as a horror film (p. 29), hence giving evidence that the elderly man's gaze acquires particular symbolism.

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" has been widely acclaimed as one of the finest tales of horror of all times, even to the extent that the American master of contemporary horror Stephen King (2001) claims that "terror is the sound of the old man's continuing pulsebeat" in Poe's tale (p. 37). Analogously, Álvarez's film is also a psychological horror narrative that takes place inside a house that conceals a secret, which acts as a metaphorical counterpart to the heart beatings in Poe's tale. In terms of architextuality, which involves the designation of a text as part of a genre, both narratives comprise features that categorise them as pertaining to the genre of the fantastic. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov's terminology, the fantastic consists of a literary genre of hesitation which responds to the marvellous, when actions do not obey natural expectations and are considered supernatural, or the strange, when events are ultimately given a natural explanation. As narratives of the fantastic, Poe's tale and Álvarez's film fluctuate between the marvellous and the strange. "The Tell-Tale Heart" includes displays of the marvellous, as the old man's beatings of the heart appear to persist even after his death, although it is

suggested that this apparently supernatural event might respond to the narrator's nervous condition, which would ascribe the tale to the strange. Correspondingly, as a narrative of the fantastic, *Don't Breathe* mostly pertains to the strange, given its realistic approach, but the elderly man's uncanny skills in spite of his disability, along with the terrible secret that he conceals in the basement of his house, are initially interpreted as possible displays of the marvellous.

The transtextual relationship between Poe's tale and Álvarez's film also displays instances of hypertextuality, which involve the connection between a later narrative known as hypertext which transforms, elaborates or extends a previous narrative known as hypotext. Considering Poe's tale as a hypotext and Álvarez's film as a hypertext, the original narrative, in which a homodiegetic narrator confesses having murdered an elderly man as a result of feeling overwhelmingly exposed to his omniscient gaze, is further elaborated in terms of plot development, characterisation, motivation, and the narration of events. Poe's tale exclusively revolves around the narrator's confession of his murder of the old man and his final arrest, whereas Álvarez's film elaborates further on the story, portraying the events prior to the entrance in the house and those taking place until the final release. If the characters remain unnamed in Poe's tale, in the film, the elderly man is called Norman Nordstrom, a veteran of the Gulf War who was blinded by shrapnel, and among the thieves, Rocky – on whom the narrative mostly focalises – is a young girl from a dysfunctional family who feels obliged to steal to support her sister, Money is a professional thief and Rocky's boyfriend, and Alex comes from a middle-class background, but feels moved to help Rocky out of his love for her. Accordingly, the narrator's statement in Poe's tale that he was not interested in the elderly man's money is reversed in the film and becomes the actual motivation for the thieves to break into the elderly man's house. Besides, in terms of the narration of the events, if Poe's tale responds to analepsis, as the narrator unfolds events from the past, in the film, the sequence of events mostly follows a chronological order except for an instance of prolepsis, which subtly anticipates a scene taking place toward the end of the film, when the elderly man captures Rocky.

Álvarez's film also provides a series of instances of metatextuality, which consists of an explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another. Poe's tale presents displays of metafiction, as the narrator explicitly refers to the act of telling the story. Correspondingly, Álvarez's film follows the conventions of the horror genre, which establish links with previous cinematic narratives and literary texts of the genre, particularly Poe's tale. From a narratological perspective, Poe's story has been heralded for its unreliable narrator, which leads to calling into question the veracity and accuracy of the events. The critical interpretation of Poe's tale, which questions the consistency of the narrator's confession, paves the way for alternative readings of the story, as is the case with Álvarez's contemporary

adaptation of the tale in which the elderly man survives and fights back against his assailants. Moreover, critical approaches to Poe's tale underscore that the narrator and the aged man may be described as doubles of each other, since they appear to be watching over one another. As Tony Magistrale (2001) claims, "the identities of the old man and the narrator run together" and "by killing the old man […] the narrator is attempting to kill a part of himself" (p. 84). In the film, if Norman has lost his daughter, Rocky has also lost her father, which symbolically binds both characters together, but also underscores their rivalry, thus categorising them as symbolic doubles. In particular, drawing on psychoanalytic readings of Poe's story, as those provided by Marie Bonaparte (1949) and Daniel Hoffman (1998), the elderly man has been interpreted as Poe's repressed father figure. In Álvarez's film, insofar as Rocky has also tried to stifle the figure of her father, she finds herself fighting against her trauma as a daughter when she faces Norman. Finally, theorists like Frederick Frank and Anthony Magistrale (1997) note that, even though the narrator in Poe's tale has often been considered male, insofar as the sex of the narrator is never mentioned, there is no reason why the narrator could not be a woman. Drawing on this critical interpretation, in Álvarez's film, the narrative mainly focalises on the character of Rocky, a young female who threatens to overthrow the elderly man's authority, and thus, arises as a female counterpart of the narrator in Poe's tale.

3. The power of the gaze, methods of surveillance, and domestic gothic

In Poe's tale and Álvarez's film, there are recurring references to the acts of looking, prying, and invigilating, which draw attention to the dynamics of surveillance and exposure. In both cases, the intruders choose their victims making explicit mention to their eyes, insofar as the elderly veteran in *Don't Breathe* is blind, whereas, in Poe's tale, the narrator plainly states that the aged man's eye irritates him. The description of the aging man's gaze in Poe's tale faithfully matches Alvarez's portrayal of the elderly man's blindness in the film by means of a series of recurrent close-ups that draw attention to his eyes. In Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919/2003), eyes become an embodiment of subjectification, even phonetically evoking the self. The characterisation of the elderly men's eyes in both Poe's tale and Álvarez's film evokes a depersonalised subject who holds the gaze, and by extension, the power of subjecting others. As Phillip Grayson (2019) argues, in Poe's tale, "the old man is reduced to solely his eye" (p. 131), so that the narrator waits until he stares at the elderly man's exposed eye in order to commit his murder, since it is his overwhelming gaze that leads the narrator to dehumanise the elderly man. As is stated, "it was open – wide, wide open – and I grew furious as I gazed upon it […] I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person" (Poe, 1978, p. 795). Analogously, Álvarez's film emphasises the

elderly man's eyes paradoxically conveying that his blind eyes endow him with an omniscient, almost god-like, kind of vision that oversees everything. Nevertheless, as Isaac Rooks (2019) claims, Norman's blindness also indicates "the character's inability to move on" (p. 28) and let go of the past. As the plot unfolds, when his daughter was killed in a car accident, Norman lost his faith in legality and rather resorted to a retributive system of his own, as his blindness symbolically reverts back to the classic notion of blind justice. Norman's home is secured by means of a series of outdated and analogue devices, like bolts, chains, barred windows, bells, padlocks, firearms, a rudimentary safety box, and a trained dog. The only concession that the aging man has made to technology is a home alarm system, which ironically proves more defective than the analogue security devices, since the young intruders manipulate it to break into the house. Hence, the elderly men in Poe's tale and Álvarez's film embody a depersonalised and omniscient gaze as aging patriarchs prevailing from former times and extending to present days.

There is also evidence of other dynamics of surveillance in both narratives. As a counterpart to the aged man's overwhelming gaze, the narrator in Poe's (1978) tale acquires the habit of prying and peeping into the elder's room. As is stated in the tale, "it took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him" (p. 793). In the film, the young intruders, especially one of them, Money, supervises the blind man's movements and routines, and pries into his house to make arrangements for the burglary. In addition to individualised acts of surveillance, there are also instances of mutual gazing, which symbolically stand for a confrontation of subjectivities. Correspondingly, in Álvarez's film, the elderly man and the young intruders oppose each other, aware that, with the lights on, these interlopers play with advantage, whereas, in the pitch dark of the basement, the blind man rules to their disadvantage. Similarly, in Poe's tale, in the darkness of the elderly man's room, the narrator exerts the power of the gaze over the elderly man, who feels vulnerable and at the mercy of his slayer, although the elder will eventually manage to expose the narrator in the presence of the policemen.

Both narratives also display a recurring pulse between concealment and exposure. In Poe's tale, once the narrator has disposed of the old man's body, officers search the premises, urging the narrator to feel "excited to fury by the observations of the men" (p. 797), to the point of exposing himself to reveal the body's hiding place. Analogously, in the film, aware that the intruders have been searching the house, the blind man checks his safety box to ensure his money is still in it, and in so doing, unaware that he is being watched over, Rocky spots the place where the man conceals the coveted booty, when the man precisely intended to secure it.

The dynamics of surveillance and exposure in both narratives also extend to involve the audience in practices of voyeurism. The narrator in Poe's tale often boasts about his skills to get rid of the aged man's eye, ironically stating that, after concealing his body, "no human eye – not even *his* – could have detected anything wrong" (p. 796), and appealing to the reader, exclaiming that "you should have seen me" (p. 792). In resemblance, Álvarez's film presents recurring voyeuristic frames into the different rooms of the elderly man's house, drawing the audience's attention to the blind man's concern about security enforcement and enclosure, which has urged him to turn his apparently welcoming house into an actual fortress. Consequently, both narratives underscore the fallacy of intimacy and assumed safety. At the end of Poe's tale, the narrator feels as exposed and vulnerable as the elderly man used to feel in his presence. Likewise, as Álvarez's film progresses, the young intruders also feel helpless and unprotected in the blind man's house, insofar as, precisely owing to his blindness, the aged man knows his house as well as if it were an extension of his body.

Drawing on Alice Marwick's (2012) notions of power, hierarchy and reciprocity, the dynamics of surveillance and exposure are portrayed in a diverse manner in Poe's tale and Álvarez's film. The narrator and the elderly man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" respectively exert their powers of surveillance alternatively, whereas, in *Don't Breathe*, Norman Nordstrom and his assailants are simultaneously surveilled by one another. As Marwick (2012) notes, drawing on Michel Foucault's premises (1995), power is possessed by the surveillors and is exerted over the surveilled, although Foucault proposed an alternate model, known as the capillaries of power, which is decentralised and allows the flow of power between authorities and individuals. In Poe's tale, the narrator boasts about his power over the elderly man, although he also concedes that he felt subjected to the old man's evil eye, so that each of them displays his power of surveillance alternatively. Conversely, in Álvarez's film, the elderly man and his assailants rather engage in a continuous pulse of power which takes place simultaneously. In relation to hierarchy, if traditional models of surveillance involve that hegemonic power structures watch over individuals, Foucault's model of capillaries of power entails that power remains in flux between individuals. In Poe's tale, it is the narrator who mostly invigilates upon the elderly man, whereas, in Álvarez's film, both the elderly man and his assailants watch over one another. Finally, in terms of reciprocity, there is asymmetry when individuals are watched by powers that they cannot watch back, whereas, in social surveillance, the subjects who practice it are simultaneously surveilled by others. In Poe's tale, the asymmetry of surveillance between the narrator and the elderly man becomes more prevalent, whereas, in Álvarez's film, all the subjects symmetrically invigilate upon one another. Hence, the triad of power, hierarchy and reciprocity correspondingly give rise to different patterns of surveillance and exposure in both narratives.

Additionally, Poe's tale and Álvarez's film respectively display instances that exemplify the dyad between surveillance and coveillance, the panopticon and the synopticon, and the notions of 'glass house' and 'blind house'. As Marwick further notes, in instances of surveillance, whereby systemic structures supervise individuals, there is an imbalance of power in favour of the surveillor, an asymmetry in which individuals are surveilled by structural entities, and a lack of reciprocity, since individuals are prevented from watching back their surveillors. Conversely, by means of sousveillance or coveillance, the surveilled subjects are allowed to watch over their surveillors, while watchers also invigilate upon the watched. If Poe's tale mostly consists of a narrative that displays instances of surveillance, as the narrator supervises all the elderly man's movements, even though it is implied that the narrator had previously been exposed to the elderly man's supervision, in Álvarez's film, it is rather claimed that surveillors and surveilled watch over each other permanently. Besides, the dynamics of surveillance and exposure that are at work in these narratives bring to mind the notions of the panopticon and of the synopticon. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's model of the ideal prison, in the context of discipline society, Foucault (1995) refers to the panopticon as the model whereby the few monitor the many, hence reinforcing social inequalities and persuading people into conformity. Conversely, following Thomas Mathiesen's (2008) concept of synopticon, in the context of the viewer society, the many watch the few, as new techniques of surveillance and exposure allow individuals to turn into watchers. In Poe's tale, the narrator adopts the model of the panopticon, as he watches over the elderly man constantly without him noticing that he is being watched. In contrast, in Álvarez's film, the young assailants watch over the elderly man's movements prior to breaking into his house, thus focusing on a single subject who is invigilated upon by many. Furthermore, abodes are classified into glass houses, which turn into a prime site for voyeurism and total disruption of privacy, and blind houses, in which all access to the outside has been apparently removed. In Poe's tale, even if locked in his room, the elderly man is totally exposed to the narrator's gaze, as if he were in a glass house, whereas, in Álvarez's film, the assailants find it hard to gain entry into the elderly man's house, which, like its owner, looks particularly vulnerable, but truly arises as a paradigm of a blind house, having removed all access to the outside.

Both Poe's tale and Álvarez's film display the portrayal of the house which pervades domestic gothic fiction, in which, the abode arises as a character of its own that protects and threatens its dwellers. In this respect, the house becomes a source of the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which etymologically refers both to the home and the unhomely. According to Noël Carroll, in horror narratives, there are "creatures that transgress categorical distinctions" (2004, p. 43) and, by means of fusion, "blur the distinction between living and dead" (2004, p. 43), as often happens with houses with a secret of their own. More recently, Rebecca Janicker

(2015, p. 2) claims that houses possess connotations of security and secrecy, while they address the fears of individuals in relation to society. The respective houses in Poe's tale and Álvarez's film bring into contact dwellers with subjects who no longer inhabit the abode, but whose latent presence still remains to haunt the present residents. At the same time, the houses in these narratives underscore the isolation of their inhabitants, and their sense of being exposed to the dangers that threaten them from the outside. Besides, theorists like Patricia García (2015) establish a distinction between the fantastic of place to refer to houses which host the fantastic transgression, and the fantastic of space to involve abodes which cause the supernatural (p. 21). In Álvarez's film, the elderly man's house turns into the receptacle where he displays his uncanny skills in spite of his disability, thus arising as an example of the fantastic of place. In Poe's tale, the house where the events unfold paves the way for the emergence of the supernatural, as the narrator still hears the elderly man's heart beatings even after his death, hence the house turns into an example of the fantastic of space. According to Elaine Hartnell-Mottram (2019), in domestic gothic narratives, the home also bears witness to abusive intergenerational relationships (p.185). In Poe's tale and Álvarez's film, there is a clear rivalry between the elderly owner of the house and his younger assailants, who not only threaten to subvert the role of the elder as owner of the manor, but also his alleged authority.

4. Aging masculinities and intergenerational doubles

The politics of surveillance that are manifested in Poe's story and Álvarez's film are deeply entrenched in discourses of age and gender. The literal, but also symbolic, rivalry between the old man and the young narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is resumed by means of the contention taking place between the old man and the young criminals in Álvarez's *Don't Breathe*. In Poe's tale, the narrator displays instances of hegemonic masculinity – a term coined by sociologist Raewyn Connell in 1987, which has conventionally associated manhood with values such as courage and physical strength – as he powerfully watches over his older victim, who exhibits traits pertaining to aging masculinities – a term used by Pamela Gravagne (2013) to refer to the declining effects that aging is usually alleged to have on the perceptions of masculinity. Nonetheless, as the story progresses, the roles are exchanged insofar as the young narrator becomes increasingly powerless, whereas the elderly man's presence, in spite of his absence, overwhelms the young narrator. Analogously, in Álvarez's film, the young criminals – particularly, Money, who embodies instances of hegemonic masculinity – takes for granted that the elderly man is helpless as a result of his apparent aging masculinity, although the roles are eventually exchanged, when the elderly man unexpectedly displays instances of hegemonic masculinity, as he invigilates upon the intruders and gives evidence of his strength and skills.

In terms of age and gender, the young male characters in Poe's tale and Álvarez's film comply with tenets pertaining to hegemonic masculinities in contrast with aging men, who appear to have left behind traits associated with hegemonic masculinities. In Poe's (1978) tale, the young narrator confesses that "never, before that night, had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity" and that "I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph" (p. 793). Analogously, in Álvarez's film, among the three thieves who break into the blind man's house, as Rooks (2019) notes, "Money wants to cultivate his thuggish persona" (p. 22). The notion of hegemonic masculinity has traditionally connected manhood with values, such as courage, physical strength, and impassiveness. As critics Robert Meadows and Kate Davidson (2006) argue, if hegemonic masculinities legitimise patriarchy by means of extolling values which have often been connected with youth – such as strength and self-control – conversely, features conventionally associated with old age – like vulnerability and even disability – may result in the exclusion of elderly men from hegemonic conceptualisations of masculinity (p. 296). Accordingly, in Poe's (1978) tale, as he watches over the old man, the young narrator explains that, when his elder discovers that he is being watched, he cannot help a "low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe" (p. 794). Similarly, in Álvarez's film, as Rooks (2019) argues, the blind man's disability makes him seem vulnerable, thus being categorised as a helpless victim, even to the extent that one of the assailants, Alex, expresses his reservations about attacking an elderly blind man (p. 29). As Gullette (2011) claims, in Western society, old age often complies with a narrative of decline, inasmuch as old age has conventionally been connected with a process of loss and decreasing capability. These essentialist categorisations of old age have effect on the ways of defining manhood, since, old age is alleged to have a decaying and weakening effect on the perceptions of masculinity.

According to Hilde Lindemann Nelson (1995), by means of resorting to counter-narratives, individuals are allowed to reclaim part of their threatened identity. As Gravagne (2013) claims, aging patriarchs "reclaim their age-threatened masculine identities by offering a conservative discourse of masculinity as triumphant" (p. 53) in order to counteract the spectre of old age and its associated powerlessness. In Poe's (1978) tale, even if the young narrator underlines the elderly man's fear and fragility as he invigilates upon him every night, he also admits his concern about the elderly man's evil eye, as an embodiment of his identity as a patriarch and as a source of authority that the elderly man still retains. Analogously, in Álvarez's film, it is unveiled that, despite his disability, the elderly man still holds on to his way of life as a war veteran and he still retains his skills as a proficient soldier, while he has learned to develop other senses that make up for his blindness. Accordingly, instead of succumbing to embracing old age as a narrative of decline, the elderly

man in Álvarez's film rather exemplifies the tenets of positive aging which allows him to compete and defeat his younger assailants. Nonetheless, in both narratives, it is also portrayed that, even if the aging men resort to the hegemonic masculinities that used to characterise their youth, they increasingly realise that their aging masculinities seem to be at odds with the values often associated with dominant manhood. Consequently, in Poe's tale, the old man is slain by his younger counterpart, as the latter admits that "his eye would trouble me no more" (p. 795), whereas, in Álvarez's film, not only do the assailants manage to break into the elderly man's house, but also to open his safety box and rob him of his money. In this respect, theorist Gabrielle Mueller (2009) even implies that standing by the tenets of hegemonic masculinities in old age may bring forward a symbolic "process of emasculation" (p. 151). In Poe's tale, it is the strong beatings of the old man's heart that ultimately render him helpless and manage to threaten his hegemonic masculinity. Correspondingly, in Álvarez's film, as a result of his disability, the old man has developed a symbiotic bond with his house, which compels him to stay home. Additionally, having lost his daughter in an accident, the aging blind man kidnaps the woman who was responsible for his daughter's death and incarcerates her in his basement with the view to artificially impregnate her so that she will conceive his child, as a symbolic process of emasculation, which urges him to indulge in an aberrant attempt to enjoy motherhood of his own. Consequently, as Meadows and Davidson (2006) claim, rather than attempting to conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity, aged men may resort to alternative masculinities which incorporate actions that are not derived from physical strength, but instead, embrace vulnerability, in terms of psychological exposure and physical fragility (p. 302).

Displays of alternative masculinities on behalf of the elders and of hegemonic masculinities as exemplified by their younger counterparts contribute to blurring the roles initially assigned to old patriarchs and their young assailants. As a case in point, in Poe's tale, the beatings of the heart that haunt the young narrator may come from the deceased old man, but also from the young narrator himself as a result of his disorder and sense of guilt. Hence, as a result of a symbiotic process, both characters symbolically turn into doubles of each other, as the young narrator leaves behind his self-confident ways and embraces the old man's sense of fragility, whereas the old man eventually exerts his power over his younger counterpart. Similarly, in Álvarez's film, as a result of an extended process of mutual surveillance, the aging man and one of the young assailants, Rocky, develop a symbiotic process which leads them to blur their initially distinguished role, as the victim turns into a victimiser and vice versa. In particular, Rocky has lost her father, while the old man has lost his daughter, both are socially ostracised, and refuse to accept the parts according to age and gender that society has assigned

them. Hence, the elderly man and his young assailant turn into symbolic doubles, who feel condemned to watch over each other.

5. Conclusion

A comparative analysis between Poe's tale and Álvarez's film gives evidence of significant transtextual connections ranging from intertextuality to hypertextuality and metatextuality. In both cases, younger assailants plan to attack an elderly man in order to take advantage of his apparent weakness and vulnerability only to realise that their older counterpart possesses the skills and resolution to defeat them. The pervasive references to the elderly man's gaze in Poe's tale find correlation in the recurrent close-up shots of Norman Nordstrom's eyes in Álvarez's film. In addition, the dynamics of surveillance and exposure between the young narrator and his older victim are reinstated in the film, as the young assailants watch over the elderly man before breaking into his house. Nevertheless, Álvarez's film takes over and elaborates further on the dialectics between the surveillance and exposure of the narrator and the elderly man, insofar as, in the film, the characters reciprocally invigilate upon each other and display instances of mutual gazing, while the film also underscores the urge to vindicate the figure of the elderly man. In this respect, it may be argued that one of Álvarez's contributions in comparison with Poe's tale is that it focuses explicitly on the potential of aging masculinities and defies ageist prejudices on behalf of younger counterparts. Conversely, though, the elderly blind man, as a contemporary successor of the aging man in Poe's tale, still represents the figure of the aging patriarch who holds on to the ways of the past and rejoices renewed popularity in the contemporary political context. As theorists like Rooks claim, "an old white man waving a gun and literally blind to the world around him, feels like a grotesque parody of a Trump voter" (2019, p.23). As is evinced, the dualities and dynamics of surveillance and exposure rooted in Poe's original tale are taken over and elaborated on in Álvarez's film, hence displaying the potentiality and current relevance of Poe's story, which is still explored and reconfigured in contemporary horror narratives.

References

Álvarez, F. (Director). (2016). *Don't Breathe* [Film]. Screen Gems. Stage 6 Films. Ghost House Pictures.

Bakhtin, M. N. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (M. Holquist & C. Emerson, Trans.). University of Texas Press.

Bloom, H. (1975). *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press.

Bonaparte, M. (1949). *The Life and Works of Edgar Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (J. Rodker, Trans.). Hogarth Press.

Carroll, N. (2004). *The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge.

Clover, C. (1992). *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press.

Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and Power*. Polity Press.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Frank, F., & Magistrale T. (Eds.). (1997). *The Poe Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press.

Freud, S. (2003). *The Uncanny* (D. McLintock, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1919)

García, P. (2015). *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature*. Routledge.

Genette, G. (1992). *The Architext: An Introduction* (J. Lewin, Trans.). University of California Press.

Gravagne, P. (2013). *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. McFarland.

Grayson, P. (2019). All Things in Heaven and Earth: The Ethics of Vision in 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' In G. Del Guercio (Ed.), *Psychology in Edgar Allan Poe* (pp. 121–137). Logos Verlag.

Gullette, M. M. (2011). *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*. University of Chicago Press.

Hartnell-Mottram, E. (2019). Domestic Gothic. In W. Hugues, D. Punter, & A. Smith (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (pp. 184–187). Wiley Blackwell.

Hoffman, D. (1998). *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. Doubleday.

Janicker, R. (2015). *The Literary Haunted House: Lovecraft, Matheson, King and the Horror in Between*. McFarland.

King, S. (2001). *Danse Macabre*. Warner Books.

Kristeva, J. (1986). *The Kristeva Reader*. Columbia University Press.

Magistrale, T. (2001). *Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Greenwood Press.

Marwick, A. (2012). The Public Domain: Surveillance in Everyday Life. *Surveillance & Society, 9*(4), 378–393. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v9i4.4342

Mathiesen, T. (2008). The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited. In C. Greer (Ed.), *Crime and Media: A Reader* (pp. 506–520). Routledge.

Meadows, R., & Davidson, K. (2006). Maintaining Manliness in Later Life: Hegemonic Masculinities and Emphasised Femininities. In T. Calasanti, & K. Slevin (Eds.), *Age Matters: Realigning Feminist Thinking* (pp. 295–312). Routledge.

Mueller, G. (2009). The Aged Traveler: Cinematic Representations of Post-Retirement Masculinity. In H. Hartung, & R. Maierhofer (Eds.), *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age* (pp. 149–185). Lit Verlag.

Nelson, H. L. (1995). Resistance and Insubordination. *Hypatia*, *10*(2), 23–40. https://doi.org./10.1111/j.1527-2001.1995.tb01367.x

Poe, E. A. (1978). The Tell-Tale Heart. In T. O. Mabbott (Ed.), *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume III: Tales and Sketches* (pp. 789–799). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Rife, K. (2016, August 27). Fede Álvarez's *Don't Breathe* on Reversing Our Horror Expectations. *A.V. Club*. https://www.avclub.com/don-t-breathe-s-fede-alvarez-on-reversing-our-horror-ex-1798251141

Rooks, I. (2019). Panic in Detroit: *Don't Breathe* and the Fear of Old Cities, Homes and Men. In C. J. Miller, & A. Bowdoin van Riper (Eds.), *Elder Horror: Essays on Film's Frightening Images of Aging* (pp. 22–31). McFarland.

Todorov, T. (1975). *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (R. Howard, Trans.). Cornell University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Jesús Blanco Hidalga, University of Córdoba, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.20-30

"All Manners of Monsters": Transparency and the Alt-Right in Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill*

ABSTRACT
Red Pill (2020) is a novel by British writer Hari Kunzru. The novel explores two ongoing socio-political trends. First, it is concerned with the dominance of transparency in contemporary society, a situation which is presented as totalitarian. Then, *Red Pill* analyses the rise of the alt-right in Western countries. Kunzru also highlights the shortcomings of common center-left responses to modern-day far-right discourse. This article examines the novel from the point of view of Critical Transparency Studies, drawing on the work of, among other, Georg Simmel and Byung-Chul Han.

KEYWORDS
Hari Kunzru; critical transparency studies; contemporary politics; alt-right; Byung-Chul Han; Georg Simmel

1. Introduction

Red Pill is a novel published in 2020 by American-based, British writer Hari Kunzru. The novel explores two ongoing socio-political phenomena. First, it addresses the current dominance of a kind of social transparency which is presented as ideologically homogenising and oppressive. I will be approaching this issue from the point of view of critical transparency studies, an emerging field – named by Alloa and Thomä (2018) – concerned with the cultural and political dialectics between secrecy and transparency[1]. To this end, I will be drawing upon the work of thinkers such as Byung-Chul Han (2024), Georg Simmel (1906) or Shoshana Zuboff (2019). Secondly, *Red Pill* explores the ideology and discursive strategies

[1] In her co-edited volume on secrecy in American fiction, Paula Martín-Salván (2024) further develops the concept: "The academic field of critical transparency studies integrates different notions of transparency, with an emphasis on the shift from the utopian desire for institutional transparency – which is still acknowledged as the main political meaning of the term – to the panoptical dystopia in which individual privacy would not exist (p. 8).

Jesús Blanco Hidalga, Departamento de Filologías Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Córdoba, Plaza del Cardenal Salazar, 3, 14071 Córdoba, z02blhij@uco.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6767-745X

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

of the new reactionary right on the rise in Western democracies. The novel, which is told from the point of view of its narrator, a left-wing intellectual, keeps an ambiguous standpoint, as it acknowledges these issues as threats, but it also reveals the flaws and weaknesses of current center-left political stands[2]. In this way the novel encourages readers to re-evaluate them and to revise their own positions. This article analyses how *Red Pill* deals with these two points of interest.

2. Left-wing anxieties and fear of "monsters": An allegorical novel

The novel's narrator and main character embodies the anxieties arisen within the contemporary political left as a consequence of the rise of the far right as well as the increasing enforcement of transparency on citizens. *Red Pill* is told in first-person speech by a progressive British writer of Asian origin based in Brooklyn, very much like Kunzru himself[3]. From the beginning of the novel, this unnamed narrator is beset with fears about the future, particularly regarding the rise of the far-right around the world, which he perceives as a path to barbarism. This writer is awarded a scholarship in Wannsee, Berlin, by the Deuter Center, a German cultural institution. However, on arrival the narrator is dismayed by the philosophy of the Center, which promotes an "open and transparent society" and, accordingly, offers an open-plan workplace where each resident's labor can be observed by the rest. Unable to get any work done and in a state of increasing anxiety, the protagonist spends hours on end scrolling away on the internet in his room and becomes obsessed by a grim, nihilistic police procedural called *Blue Lives*, which he binge-watches on his laptop. Gradually, the symbolic character of the narrator becomes apparent as we realize that his fears, his ineffectiveness, his defensive attitude and his eventual breakdown stand for those of the contemporary left. By remarkable coincidence, the narrator is taken to a fashionable jet-set party in Berlin where he meets Gary Bridgeway, the screenwriter of *Blue Lives* himself, who turns out to be a charismatic leader of the alt-right[4]. The far-fetched happenstance of the narrator's encounter with Bridgway soon confirms the novel

[2] The amplitude of the center-left spectrum in the novel is delimited on the one hand by the narrator, who places himself clearly within the left, and by his wife, who collaborates with Hillary Clinton's campaign.

[3] It should be noted that the narrator is a considerably stereotyped character: the familiar left-wing intellectual, with a political commitment that is mostly theoretical, in the midst of a midlife crisis. He is knowledgeable about critical theory but, as regards actual engagement, as he puts it, "[t]he only political slogan that had ever really moved me was *Ne travaillez jamais*" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 11). His wife says he uses cynicism "as an excuse to do nothing" (p. 274).

[4] Following George Hawley (2017, p. 11), we may define the alt-right as a heterogeneous constellation of groups and individuals with right-wing sensibilities who reject mainstream conservatism and some of its traditional values. As Hawley argues, the main unifying point of the alt-right is white-nationalism. Hermansson et al. (2020) add as a common feature the belief that the rights of white males are being attacked by "liberal elites" who use "multiculturalism" and "political

allegoric character. By means of a small set of stereotyped characters, Kunzru presents his vision of an ineffective left on the defensive before the rise of a new, unabashed far right. Bridgeway, better known as Anton, rapidly becomes the narrator's ideological antagonist. Articulate, well-versed in the ideas of reactionary thinkers of the eighteenth century and derisive of the philosophical legacy of that era, Anton is clearly devised after the model of theorists such as Curtis Yarvin, or the accelerationist philosopher Nick Land, both founders of a movement called Dark Enlightenment, also known as Neo-reactionary movement, which now is usually seen as part of the alt-right. This trend, which promotes anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian ideas, is also characterized by a marked anti-humanism and an embrace of completely unrestrained capitalism[5].

After this encounter, the narrator becomes fixated with Anton and starts tracing his online activity. In this way, the horrified writer comes to explore the alt-right blogosphere. Soon, his dread gradually turns into downright paranoia. In a state of severe distress, he follows a quite symbolic Middle East refugee and his little daughter to a refugee reception centre in Wannsee, where he tries in vain to help them. Eventually, the narrator is expelled from the Deuter Center. However, rather than flying back home, he follows Anton to a film festival in Paris, in a frenzied attempt to challenge his political activity. Obsessed with him, the narrator travels to a remote Scottish island where he believes Anton has a personal refuge, ready for a final confrontation with him. There, he is detained by the police in a state of schizophrenic delusion. He is subsequently admitted to a mental institution where he stays for some weeks. After his recovery, the narrator is received by his family in Brooklyn and has to go through the painful process of regaining their trust. The novel ends with the narrator and his wife on the 2016 election night, bracing for the triumph of Donald Trump, which he describes as "a portal through which all manners of monsters could step into our living room" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 274).

3. Transparency issues: An adversarial notion

During the first part of *Red Pill*, the oppressive character of imposed transparency appears as its main concern. Before we look into the novel's approach to this

correctness" for that (p. 2). In the novel, Anton and his white-nationalist followers express these beliefs unequivocally.

[5] Nick Land was one of the founding figures of accelerationism in the late 1990s. This philosophical current defends unleashing the transformative potentialities of capitalism and technology to facilitate social change. Accelerationism soon divided into contradictory right and left-wing factions, with Land representing the former. American blogger Curtis Yarvin set the basis of the Neo-reactionary movement between 2007 and 2008, mostly under the Mencius Moldbug pseudonym. Prominent figures of the American right such as political strategist Steve Bannon, venture capitalist Peter Thiel or US Vice-president JD Vance have mentioned Yarvin as an influence. His ideas were further developed by Nick Land, who coined the term "Dark Enlightenment" in his essay of the same name published online in 2012 (printed in 2022).

concept, a succinct clarification is in order, since transparency is a highly multivalent and ambiguous notion. As Clare Birchall has put it, "[s]ecrecy and transparency are malleable, floating signifiers" (Birchall, 2021, p. 4). Simplifying matters for the sake of brevity, we may argue that, as Birchall has shown, the idea of transparency in politics and government activity has come to be seen as an absolute good in popular political discourse, especially within the left, as it is seen as indispensable to avoid corruption and promote good governance (Birchall, 2011, p. 1). However, a growing number of critics have come to see transparency in a negative way. Paula Martín-Salván (2024) has explained this position as an "adversarial" view of transparency:

> They use transparency as an adversarial term for political contestation, identifying state surveillance and self-exposure as the twin evils embodying the totalizing tendencies of technopolitical transparency. They tend to draw on a Foucauldian theoretical framework identifying Modernity as the age of discipline and surveillance, and they implicitly endorse a liberal understanding of the public/private divide. (p. 11)

This is clearly the view adopted by the novel's narrator. He finds his open-plan workstation intolerable, as it induces a crippling self-consciousness that precludes any creative work. When he complains to the Deuter Center's management, he is told that the Center is intended to be an "experimental community" and was conceived "as a microcosm of the wider public sphere" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 23–24) by its founder, the late German industrialist, politician and philanthropist Herr Deuter. Soon afterwards, the narrator comes to suspect that the fellows of the Center are subject to video surveillance and he quotes Foucault to characterize the Deuter Center as a panopticon (p. 92). However, the narrator's views resonate more clearly with the thought of the South Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han as expressed in *The Transparency Society* (2015) and other essays. Han is arguably the most influential of the contemporary thinkers characterized by the adversarial notion of transparency described by Martín-Salván (2024). Over a series of manifesto-like essays[6], conflating different types of transparency in sweeping statements of high rhetorical impact, Han has argued that in contemporary neoliberal society transparency has been mystified and turned into a totalitarian ideology (Han, 2015, p. viii). For Han, contemporary culture is characterized by a kind of compulsory transparency that has a homogenizing effect, promoting thus conformity and de-politization. This oppressive character of transparency is particularly obvious when, as is usually the case, it is enforced on citizens while power, be it institutional or economic, remains itself opaque. In Han's words, "[c]ompulsive transparency stabilizes the existing system most effectively. Transparency is inherently positive. It does not harbour negativity that might

[6] See for example Han (2017) and Han (2024).

radically question the political-economic system as it stands. It is blind to what lies outside the system" (Han, 2015, p. 7).

In consonance with Han's views, the novel reflects on how transparency may be invoked to actually bring about selective opacity in the socio-political field when it is demanded of citizens rather than power. This is exemplified by Herr Deuter, the founder of the institution, who evolved from a Wehrmacht officer into a Christian Democrat and a prominent businessman of post-war Germany, "one of the conjurers of the Wirtschaftswunder, the national economic miracle" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 22). Deuter's efforts sought to leave the Nazi period behind by creating a brand-new public sphere. The novel suggests that Deuter's push for transparency after the war served to reinforce conformity and de-politization in German society, as well as to obscure the Nazi past, in spite of his acknowledgement of the obligation of "confronting the darkness of the past" (p. 23). The novel mentions one of Deuter's most successful products, a white colorant named Titanium Dioxide. Kunzru's choice is significant as it symbolically suggests a widespread whitewashing of Germany's past: "the ubiquitous white pigment that brought light into the darkness of Germany's postwar domestic spaces … prized for its optical brightness … prized for its opacity" (p. 22).

4. Privacy and exposure: from the Stasi to Big Data

The first part of the novel also includes Monika's narrative. This story within a story takes the novel's depiction of totalitarian transparency to a new level of intensity. Monika, a cleaner working at the Deuter Center, accedes to telling the narrator her story as a young punk in East Germany during the 1980s. Her story shows the sheer nightmare of a true totalitarian panopticon state. Monika, like other disaffected youths, finds a spiritual refuge and a way out of a life of dismal boredom and conformity in the underground German punk rock scene. She becomes a member of an all-female punk rock band significantly called Transparent Women. However, she is soon targeted by the Stasi, who brutally coerces her into becoming an informer. One of the methods used by the Stasi to force Monika to cooperate is the use of shared secrets. The novel thus shows how a shared secret can be used to inflict an unwanted bond on someone and it may constitute a hostile form of encroachment on the self[7]. It also presents how a secret may also be used to separate people from their communities – the latin "secretus" means "to set apart". Monika realizes it: "He'd made his abuse into a shared secret, a cozy secret that had alienated her from her friends, and she was disgusted with him and with herself for falling for it" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 132). Monika's story shows how the complete obliteration of someone's privacy amounts to the

[7] As Dave Boothroyd (2011) has put it, being the recipient of a secret involves an encounter with "an absolute alterity which is 'in me' in the form of a secret" (p. 46).

hollowing out of a person's identity. When she falls completely under the power of the Stasi officers, Monika stops seeing herself as a full person (p. 139). As she says, "she felt she had no inside" (p. 141). Eventually, when her collaboration with the Stasi becomes known, she is forsaken by her friends and her life is virtually destroyed. She becomes the bearer of a stain that passes on to her life in the new unified Germany after the fall of the Wall.

Monika's narrative inevitably acts as a comment on the narrator's own story and his worries, although there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to its meaning. On the one hand, Monika's chapter seems to be a warning about the dangers of the totalitarian trends that the narrator sees in contemporary society with the rise of the far right. However, the narrator shows that he does not understand Monika's feelings, and the contrast between the horrors endured by Monika and his constant whining sheds a rather unfavorable light on him. Monika takes her leave with disparaging remarks: "She told me I was sentimental. I was trying to help you, she said. But you're soft and selfish" (p. 145). Here it is easy to feel an indictment of the ineffective progressive political position represented by the narrator[8].

In any case, we may notice in the narrator a view of privacy and secrecy as essential foundations of the self and its creative capacities, and also as necessary conditions that are at the base of social relationships. This is a view that was spelt out by the German thinker George Simmel in a seminal essay published in 1906. There, Simmel argued that the self and society are founded upon secrecy, as secrets structure and shape social relations. What we know about other people is always based upon a much larger zone of their being and experience we do not know about. Consequently, social relations rest on mutual faith. As Simmel (1906, p. 445) argues, "life rests upon a thousand presuppositions [about the other] which the individual can never trace back to their origins, and verify; but which he must accept upon faith and belief". And he continues: "reciprocal knowledge, which is the positive condition of social relationships, is not the sole condition. On the contrary, such as those relationships are, they actually presuppose also a certain nescience, a ratio, that is immeasurably variable to be sure, of reciprocal concealment" (p. 448).

There is a distinct reminiscence of Simmel's views in the last part of the novel, as it examines the role of secrecy and privacy in the relationship between the

[8] Monika's story serves as a reminder of the striking parallelisms between *Red Pill* and Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity* (2015). Franzen's novel also shows a conception of secrecy and privacy as an essential foundation of identity as well as social relationships which is in consonance with Simmel's thought. Likewise, *Purity* contains an acerbic critique of the totalitarian culture of transparency brought about by digital media very much in line with Han's. Last but not least, *Purity* also includes a flashback chapter set in East Germany during the 1980s featuring the Stasi, illustrating the harmful effects of invading someone's privacy and the weaponization of secret sharing. For an analysis of *Purity* from the point of view of critical transparency studies see Blanco Hidalga (2021).

narrator, in the process of recovery from his mental crisis, and his wife. As a result of his recent breakdown, the narrator's privacy arises misgivings in his wife. In absence of the mutual trust described by Simmel, privacy becomes suspicious, as the complete otherness of the people close to us becomes apparent. The narrator in turn feels "a vast gulf" between he and his wife: "Inside, Rei stretched away to infinity, a galaxy of unseen stars". The writer fears "that she was masking her true feelings, that while I'd been away she'd discovered some new part of herself about which I knew nothing" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 264). Yet, in spite of these pitfalls, the narrator still holds that privacy, threatened by contemporary culture, is indispensable for the self:

> I believe everyone has a place, a mental laboratory where we experiment with thoughts that are too strange of fragile to expose. I believe that we need to preserve it, in order to feel human. It is shrinking, its scope reduced by technologies of prediction and control, by social media's sinister injunction to share. (p. 261)

Here we see how Kunzru's adversarial view of transparency points at the new society of control brought about by data collection technologies and social media, an environment that erodes the privacy that he, like Simmel, considers essential for human identity and social relationships. In this, Kunzru is in consonance again with Han, who sees the current dominance of social media as an inverted panopticon of sorts, far more efficient than the ones described by Bentham or Foucault, as it is voluntarily fed by its inhabitants, who think they are free:

> The society of control achieves perfection when subjects bare themselves not through outer constraint but through self-generated need, that is, when the fear of having to abandon one's private and intimate sphere yields to the need to put oneself on display without shame. (Han, 2015, p. 46).

The narrator's praise of privacy contrasts with the scorn boasted by Edgar, one of the researchers at the Deuter Center. During dinner at the communal dining room, Edgar, an American neoliberal neuroscientist and a strict materialist, derides privacy as a regressive and antisocial concept, a Western liberal cultural construct. Likewise, he dismisses concerns about big data as mere superstition. Then Finlay, a black researcher, objects to the massive collection of citizens' data by governments and corporations from a subaltern minority point of view. For Finlay, this is potentially another instrument of oppression:

> Any fool can see that biases are built into these systems, and unfettered information-gathering is going to be abused. … It's obvious that you don't see the racial dimension to this. Black people been struggling for humanity over centuries now and one of the weapons you always use is to classify us, reduce us to statistics. (Kunzru, 2020, pp. 99–100)

Edgar, who ridicules black complaints about unfair treatment, is specially disparaging when arguing against humanist notions of the self. For him, "the self is just a folk notion" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 44). At the mention of the word "humanity", which sees as mere mysticism, he rants:

> [H]uman? … I thought all you people were post-structuralists or postmodernists or whatever it's called this week. You all hate the human! … You ought to be pleased about it, but instead you're just whining. I wish you'd make up your minds. (pp. 100–101)

5. Discursive appropriations and progressive weakness

Edgar's mocking hits a nerve with the narrator, as the latter's view of the self is mostly based on post-structuralist and postmodern theory[9]. This kind of thought is considered anti-humanist in the sense that it set out to reveal the constructed or metaphysical nature of many concepts central to human beings – and often Enlightenment-derived – such as language, subjectivity or reason. Edgar, who is aware of the frequent association of continental philosophy and the left, is of course deliberately misrepresenting the anti-humanism of post-structuralist theory to sneer at his leftist fellow researchers. He conflates it with the kind of negation of human dignity inherent in some of the practices of what Shoshana Zuboff has named "surveillance capitalism", such as treating human beings as raw material for the extraction of data which are then monetized in the futures markets of behavioral modification (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14), a practice he obviously has no problem with.

Edgar's purposeful twisting of post-structuralist and postmodern thought points to another interest of the novel. Kunzru seeks to show that the alt-right has adopted discursive strategies from postmodern theory and uses them successfully to undermine progressive political positions. The title of the novel points at a paradigmatic example of such appropriation. The expression "taking the red pill" comes from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, openly based on Jean Baudrillard's views about our inability to reach reality or truth in a world made of simulacra[10]. In the film, the moment of taking the pill by the protagonist symbolically amounts to becoming aware of the reality that is usually masked by dominant ideology.

---

[9] As an example, his research proposal for the scholarship is entitled "The lyric as a textual technology for the organization of affective experience and a container in which modern selfhood has come to be formulated" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 15).

[10] It should be noted that in a 2003 interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur* Baudrillard criticized the Wachowski siblings, creators of the film, for having misrepresented his thought. The philosopher argued that the movie does present a real world which is different and apart from the digital simulation inhabited by the protagonists, a reality that can be accessed by them. Baudrillard dismissed this as a reformulation of classical Platonism (for an English translation of the interview by Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx see https://jcgaal.medium.com/the-matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur-interview-with-jean-baudrillard-cc8b293cd499).

However, a gesture that was intended by the directors of the film as an emancipating move, has subsequently been appropriated by countless representatives of the alt-right and used to signify a liberation from an alleged ideological dictatorship of political correctness and "woke" ideas[11].

Last but not least, the novel points at a manifest weakness in both liberal and progressive positions which Anton deftly exploits to reduce the shocked narrator to silence. Anton eloquently portrays Enlightenment values of reason and progress professed by liberals and progressives as just a veneer:

> You know this is bullshit, right? Reason, technocracy and a coat of white paint. … Underneath, these enlightened liberals enjoy the same dark age shit as the people they condemn. All the obscene shit. They call it humanitarian intervention, but it's just a chance to play Abu Ghraib. (Kunzru, 2020, p. 185)

For him, liberals are just "better at hiding it" (p. 185). Indeed, it is hard to deny that American governments of any sign have deployed sites where human dignity is systematically destroyed, be it Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo or Gaza. More often than not, the defense of human rights is invoked to legitimize operations that seek to reinforce US hegemony. Meanwhile, the narrator, who considers himself a person of the left and acknowledges that Hillary Clinton is "just the mask that established power is wearing right now", is compelled to vote for her because "[t]he status quo, bad as it is, looks better than the alternative" (p. 274). Thus, the narrator represents the hopelessly defensive position of much of the left nowadays, which, devoid of any initiative or transformative projection into the future, is periodically summoned to rally behind figures such as Emmanuel Macron or Joe Biden so as to prevent the triumphs of the likes of Marine Le Pen or Donald Trump – an effort which is clearly no longer working well.

6. Conclusion: dystopian visions and communitarian hopes

In the second part of the novel the rise of the alt-right replaces compulsory transparency as the novel's main concern. However, Kunzru does not present them as completely unrelated phenomena. On the contrary, both are shown to involve a negation of human dignity. According to the novel, compulsory transparency, whether enforced by a panopticon state or by surveillance capitalism as defined by

[11] It is worth noting that this kind of appropriation of is far from new. As an example, we may look at the 2004 essay "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?" by the French philosopher Bruno Latour. In that piece, written in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and its accompanying proliferation of conspiracy theories, Latour calls attention to the widespread use of critical tools usually associated to deconstruction, discourse analysis and, generally speaking, postmodern critique, by malevolent actors and extremists: "Isn't this what criticism intended to say: that there is no sure ground anywhere? But what does it mean when this lack of sure ground is taken away from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish?" (Latour, 2004, p. 231)

Zuboff, threatens the very foundations of the self. Similarly, the white nationalism of Anton and his followers offers the ground for the denial of human dignity to other social and ethnic groups. Furthermore, their ruthless worldview where "the essence of human relations is either subjection or domination" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 283), paves the way for the arrival of a dystopian, completely desacralized posthuman era of unrestrained capitalism that looks like the full realization of a right-wing accelerationist dream. Thus, near the end of the novel the narrator recounts his apocalyptic visions of the future: a system that dispenses with public politics altogether and "puts in its place the art of the deal: a black box, impossible to oversee, visible only to counterparties" (p. 226)[12]. For the narrator, "something implacable is arriving from the future" (p. 228)[13], bringing about a world with no "rights whatsoever, just the raw exercise of power" (p. 227); a world defined by "creeping loss of aura, the end of the illusion of [human] exceptionality"; a world run by AIs that subjugate human beings: "we will find that arrayed against us is an inexorable and inhuman power" (p. 227); a world where humanity has split between those "well-capitalized", for whom genetic or technological enhancement is available, and those "to whom nothing is owned and can be used and discarded without compunction" (p. 228).

The novel is certainly not optimistic. However, its ending does leave a small space for hope. Still ailing from his breakdown and distraught by Trump's victory, in his meditation the narrator verbalizes a communitarian plea: "I can say that the most precious part of me isn't my individuality, my luxurious personhood, but the web of reciprocity in which I live my life" (p. 283). And he continues: "Alone, we are food for the wolves. That's how they want us. Isolated. Prey. So we must find each other. We must remember that we do not exist alone" (p. 283). But the meaning of this statement is problematic, as it is left unclear whether the narrator is just thinking about his family or envisaging actual political organization. Itis another example in the novel of an ambiguity that challenges the reader – especially the progressive reader – to rethink their professions. This ambiguity, which contrasts with the militant character of Kunzru's previous novel *White Tears*, contributes considerably to *Red Pill*'s depth and resonance.

[12] This is of course a reference to Trump's 1987 memoir – and motto – *The Art of the Deal*.

[13] The image recalls Land's often-quoted vision of capitalism as an artificial intelligence from the future that uses human beings for its own purposes: "what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources" (Land, 1993, p. 478).

References

Alloa, E., & Thomä, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity. Critical Perspectives*. Palgrave.

Blanco Hidalga, J. (2021). "Whilst our souls negotiate": Secrets and Secrecy in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*. In M. J. López, & P. Villar-Argáiz (Eds.), *Secrecy and Community in 21st-Century Fiction* (pp. 189–205). Bloomsbury.

Birchall, C. (2011). Transparency, Interrupted: Secrets of the Left. *Theory, Culture and Society, 28*(7/8), 1–25.

Birchall, C. (2021). *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*. University of Minnesota Press.

Boothroyd, D. (2011). Off the Record: Derrida, Levinas and the Secret of Responsibility. *Theory, Culture and Society, 28*(7/8), 41–59.

Franzen, J. (2015) *Purity*. Fourth Estate.

Han, B.-Ch. (2015). *The Transparency Society*. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford University Press.

Han, B.-Ch. (2017). *Psycho-Politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso.

Han, B.-Ch. (2024). *The Crisis of Narration*. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Stanford University Press.

Hawley, G. (2017). *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. Columbia University Press.

Hermansson, P., Lawrence, D., Mulhall, J., & Murdoch, S. (2020). *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* Routledge.

Kunzru, H. (2017). *White Tears*. Hamish Hamilton.

Kunzru, H. (2020). *Red Pill*. Scribner.

Land, N. (1993). Machinic Desire. *Textual Practice*, *7*(3), 471–482.

Land, N. (2022). *The Dark Enlightenment*. Imperium.

Latour, B. (2004). Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry, 30*, 225–248.

Martín-Salván, P. (2024). Introduction. The Politics of Transparency. In P. Martín-Salván, & S. Pöhlmann (Eds.), *The Politics of Transparency in Modern American Fiction: Fear, Secrecy and Exposure* (pp. 1–29). Boydell & Brewer, Camden House. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.12771051.4

Simmel, G. (1906). "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies", *American Journal of Sociology, 11*, 441–908.

Zuboff, Sh. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Public Affairs.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

John W. Bessai, Trent University, Canada

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.31-41

Exposing the Digital Gaze: The NFBC and Vernacular Media in Contemporary Canadian Storytelling

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) as an institutional enabler of vernacular media in post-millennial Canadian storytelling. Through interactive projects such as *Bear 71* and *Do Not Track*, the NFBC supports grassroots responses to surveillance, ecological precarity, and datafication. These works engage power structures through participatory frameworks grounded in lived experience. The digital gaze anchors this analysis, highlighting how visibility, vulnerability, and civic presence emerge in digital space. *Bear 71* stages ecological surveillance as entanglement; *Do Not Track* exposes algorithmic structures of commodification. Situated within the Canadian aporetic condition – a structural dynamic of cultural multiplicity, institutional contradiction, and plural representation – the NFBC model sustains participatory media ecologies. By aligning storytelling with civic infrastructure, these works advance cultural democracy and foster enduring public engagement. This study informs Canadian Studies, media scholarship, and cultural policy.

KEYWORDS
National Film Board of Canada; vernacular media; digital gaze; participatory storytelling; Canadian aporetic condition; civic media; surveillance culture

1. Introduction

Public media institutions shape how civic life is imagined, accessed, and engaged. In the post-millennial period, the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) has emerged as a key enabler of digital civic storytelling, particularly through its Interactive Studio. This unit collaborates with artists, designers, and researchers to produce participatory works that address surveillance, environmental change, and the impact of algorithmic processes. These projects activate public discourse by emphasizing ethical design, relationality, and collective experience. Audiences become co-creators in vernacular media practices – those grounded in local knowledge, cultural memory, and shared experience (Rodriguez, 2001).

JJohn W. Bessai, Independent Scholar, Media Practitioner and Cultural Theorist, Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, ON K9L 0G2, Canada, john@bessai.com, www.johnbessai.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2755-6623

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

This article approaches NFBC interactive storytelling through the lens of cultural democracy and digital governance. Platform design and interface architecture structure visibility, engagement, and co-authorship. Projects such as *Bear 71*, *Do Not Track*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, *Supreme Law*, *The Space We Hold*, and *A Journal of Insomnia* make systemic dynamics legible and engage users in interpretive work (Couldry & Curran, 2003). The analysis follows two throughlines: surveillance/displacement and Indigenous futurism and resurgence.

The concept of the digital gaze anchors this inquiry. It refers to algorithmic operations that collect, sort, and distribute information through commercial platforms shaped by proprietary logic (Bucher, 2018). These systems organize perception, assign visibility, and influence how users encounter narratives. Visibility becomes a precondition for recognition; content flows through predictive tags and evaluations aligned with platform metrics (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Cultural participation unfolds within these structures. Users extend platform architectures through affective and interpretive responses. Within this framework, the NFBC's interactive projects facilitate mediated vernacularity inside public institutions. They reconfigure the institutional interface as a space where vernacular expression becomes legible through co-authored storytelling, sensory design, and participatory engagement. These works do not define vernacular culture as oppositional to mainstream culture. Instead, they ground it in lived experience and civic reflection.

The NFBC's ability to sustain this work emerges from its federal mandate and public accessibility. As a publicly funded agency, it operates within a structural dynamic characterized by cultural diversity, economic constraints, and evolving expectations. These tensions form the Canadian aporetic condition – a term I use to describe the contradictions that shape national cultural institutions (Bessai, 2024). NFBC projects do not resolve this condition. They work within it. Their interactive design articulates contradiction through structure, interface, and engagement. Projects such as *Do Not Track* and *Supreme Law* exemplify how public-facing digital storytelling can generate durable forms of civic participation. These works address the public. Their impact emerges through resonance, reconsideration, and collective memory.

I approach Canada as an ongoing settler-colonial formation. Structural violence continues in law, land, and everyday governance; NFBC projects can surface these realities and convene publics, while the contradictions persist beyond the works themselves.

2. The NFBC as a cultural institution

The NFBC holds a distinct position as a public institution engaged in cultural production. Established under the 1939 National Film Act, it was mandated to interpret Canada to both domestic and international audiences through audiovisual

storytelling (James, 1977; Morris, 1989). This role expanded beyond wartime information to include public education, aesthetic innovation, and democratic engagement (Magder, 1993). The NFBC now supports works exploring identity, ecology, law, and data governance through collaborative authorship and formal experimentation (National Film Board of Canada, 2014). The NFBC facilitates public access to narratives and reflections through its institutional infrastructure. Its internal structure reflects commitments to regional diversity, linguistic duality, and civic relevance. These priorities shape its production model, which integrates cultural, educational, and technological fields. NFBC circulates across classrooms, archives, festivals, and digital platforms, linking personal experiences to collective discourse (Druick, 2007; Gittings, 2002).

As a federal agency, the NFBC operates inside the state structures that sustain settler-colonial relations. This position provides resources and reach and places the work within the very contradictions it examines. This mandate aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, a framework that describes how cultural institutions navigate tensions between sovereignty, pluralism, and economic constraint (Bessai, 2024). These dynamics persist; they remain active conditions that shape cultural life. NFBC projects render them perceptible through a participatory form and digital design. The resulting narratives foreground instability, inviting civic reflection. The aporetic condition becomes legible through curatorial framing, narrative structure, and accessibility practices. Contradiction is not avoided but becomes a site for engagement. This process reflects Albert Murray's concept of the stylization of experience, where human expression organizes conflict through rhythm, form, and improvisation (Murray, 2016). The NFBC supports this public stylization, enabling responses to crises without collapsing ambiguity into resolution.

Institutional history reveals multiple phases: state-directed propaganda, oppositional filmmaking, and technological experimentation (Evans, 1991; Waugh et al., 2010). These moments reshaped authorship, production, and the interaction between authors and their audiences. Current projects extend this legacy within digital environments shaped by platform economies and algorithmic mediation. The NFBC addresses these conditions by foregrounding design literacy, civic inquiry, and participatory engagement. It does not sidestep the complexity of its funding and mandate; it incorporates these pressures into its storytelling frameworks. Through this approach, audiences encounter layered histories, contested identities, and shifting political conditions. The NFBC uses its institutional position to sustain the civic role of public media in digital culture.

The next section examines vernacular media and the ethics of exposure, building on the NFBC's institutional logic to explore storytelling as a form of civic inquiry.

3. Vernacular media and the ethics of exposure

Vernacular media arise from community practices that challenge exclusion. These forms elevate the lived experience, local knowledge, and expressive accessibility over market-driven models (Rodriguez, 2001). Each narrative emerges from the conditions it addresses, relying on embodiment, relational insight, and improvisation to create modes of endurance.

In Canada, vernacular storytelling expands through collaboration with the NFBC's Interactive Studio (Darveau, 2014). This unit collaborates with artists, designers, and researchers to develop projects that explore environmental change, surveillance, and algorithmic systems (Allison & Mendes, 2012; Gaylor, 2015). These initiatives emphasize participatory authorship, aesthetic invention, and civic orientation. Each raises ethical questions about exposure, especially regarding how design and representation affect visibility. Interface elements, data frameworks, and platform conventions structure how subjects appear and how users engage (Andrejevic, 2007). Ethical storytelling constructs interpretive frameworks in which vulnerability, legibility, and complicity emerge. Exposure operates as a relational dynamic shaped by both technological design and structural power (Butler, 2004).

Bear 71 (Allison & Mendes, 2012) exemplifies this method. Its interface tracks a collared grizzly bear's movements through maps, footage, and geospatial cues. The project prompts users to reflect on the systems that generate visual access. As they explore, users become aware of their placement within a surveillant environment. *Do Not Track* (Gaylor, 2015) builds on this approach by incorporating users' data into the narrative. Each episode reveals how digital traces circulate through commercial systems. The changing tone and structure across episodes establish a reflective space for inquiry. This participatory model connects user awareness to the wider architecture of data capture.

These works frame the digital gaze as an institutional arrangement shaped by infrastructure and visual logic. Participation unfolds under asymmetric conditions, with exposure structured by design. The NFBC's mandate sustains projects that reject commercial mandates. This institutional grounding supports storytelling anchored in civic learning, interpretive complexity, and ethical attention. Vernacular media addresses cultural contradictions through reflexive practices. NFBC initiatives provide structural support for these approaches, enabling audiences to engage with systems of power through design and inquiry.

The following section continues this analysis by examining the digital gaze within a broader cultural and institutional context.

4. Digital gaze and algorithmic space

The digital gaze structures visibility, directs attention, and transforms the experience into data. Algorithmic operations produce this gaze by collecting, classifying, and

circulating information through proprietary systems embedded in commercial infrastructure (Bucher, 2018). These processes shape interactive environments and condition how users encounter stories, images, and discourse. Visibility enables recognition. Tags, metrics, and predictive classifications organize content circulation, aligning it with platform protocols and engagement logic (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Cultural participation emerges within these regulatory systems. Users follow content shaped by data profiles, performing interpretive and affective labour that extends platform architectures.

NFBC interactive projects respond by designing interfaces that emphasize intentionality, process, and relational understanding. *Do Not Track* (Gaylor, 2015) builds a self-reflexive interface that allows users to follow their data through advertising networks. The project centers its narrative on interaction, guiding participants through algorithmic operations made visible through structured engagement. *The Space We Hold* (Hsiung et al., 2017) adopts an ethical design centred on witness testimony. Survivors of wartime sexual violence speak through an interface that pauses before each sequence, prompting user reflection. The gaze operates as a mode of care structured by duration, restraint, and moral clarity. Responsibility emerges through interface design.

Algorithmic space encompasses not only data extraction but also the design systems that organize public interaction, including recommendation engines, platform constraints, and data hierarchies, which condition participation (Noble, 2018). NFBC projects intervene in these structures by offering open narrative environments grounded in ambiguity, reflection, and temporal engagement. These settings host interpretive publics formed through shared attention and civic orientation. The NFBC supports this work through collaborative authorship, accessible platforms, and civic-centred design principles. Interface elements foreground interpretive intention and narrative openness. These features distinguish NFBC storytelling from commercial digital systems. Participation becomes a product of institutional form and aesthetic structure.

The next section examines how NFBC functions to establish memory as a robust infrastructure that integrates digital storytelling with public reckoning and networked publics.

5. Public memory and networked affect

Public memory emerges through cultural practices, institutional narratives, and mediated expression. These elements shape access to history and belonging, guiding how societies understand continuity and change. In digital environments, memory appears through tags, timelines, fragments, and interaction. The past becomes searchable, sortable, and recombined across networks (van Dijck, 2007). Within these structures, affect functions as an organizing principle. Networked affect refers to emotion transmitted across platforms. It arises from digital content and interface

design, becoming legible through shares, likes, and views (Papacharissi, 2015). These flows shape attention and define emotional frames for memory. Narratives navigate the intersection of fact and emotion, shaping meaning in digital spaces.

The NFBC engages these dynamics through projects that foreground reflective affect. This design treats emotion as civic presence. *A Journal of Insomnia* builds an immersive interface from testimonies, ambient sound, and fragmentary visuals (Duverneix & Sweeney, 2012). It avoids exposition and generates atmosphere. Users navigate a non-linear space structured for introspection. Memory and affect converge as the project presents insomnia through anxiety, grief, and isolation. These conditions become perceptible through tone, rhythm, and opacity. The interface builds a public archive that resists simplification and sustains ambiguity.

Supreme Law continues this logic through interactive chapters, archival material, and educational modules (Cizek, 2019). Its design positions constitutional history within digital space as a form shaped by political struggle and public interpretation. Affect emerges through pacing, tone, and visual rhythm. Memory becomes active through encounter and inquiry.

The NFBC's public memory model supports interpretive multiplicity and temporal openness. Its projects cultivate a democratic ethos where storytelling enables engagement. This method aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, a structure marked by tensions within Canadian public culture shaped by settler colonialism, ecological precarity, and plural claims to recognition (Bessai, 2024). Memory, in this setting, becomes an ethical horizon. Networked affect can reinforce or unsettle engagement, depending on platform design. The NFBC's autonomy supports affective depth beyond commercial metrics. It enables narrative spaces for grief, care, resilience, and dissent. These affective registers root storytelling in civic life, shaping NFBC projects as digital architectures of democratic memory.

5.1 Participatory storytelling and public engagement

Participatory storytelling generates civic presence through shared attention, interpretive engagement, and relational design. These works invite users to co-construct meaning. Participation involves reflexive navigation, ethical engagement, and situated response, cultivating a civic ethos rooted in encounter and affective reciprocity. The NFBC supports these practices through its Interactive Studio, which foregrounds collaborative authorship, social relevance, and institutional care.

Bear 71 (Allison & Mendes, 2012) uses participatory logic by placing the user within a monitored ecosystem. The story of a collared grizzly bear in Alberta's Bow Valley unfolds through interactive surveillance tools that display movement, camera feeds, and ecological data. Users engage in this system as participants embedded in environmental observation. Each interaction carries ethical weight, turning navigation into a reenactment of surveillance. This structure highlights interspecies entanglement, infrastructural power, and the politics of visibility.

The bear's story resists closure. Participation renders systems of monitoring perceptible and reorients attention toward shared vulnerability.

Circa 1948 (Douglas, 2014) expands the participatory form through historical fiction. Set in postwar Vancouver, the project reconstructs Hogan's Alley and the Hotel Vancouver as immersive memory environments. Users move through soundscapes and spatial fragments without a fixed path. The absence of maps or prompts invites reflective wayfinding. Disorientation mirrors historical erasure and displacement, emphasizing form-making as public inquiry. Meaning arises through reflective movement and fragmentary encounters. This displacement arc opens onto questions of language, land, and jurisdiction that *Biidaaban: First Light* develops through Indigenous law and urban space.

Biidaaban: First Light (Jackson, 2018) introduces Indigenous futurism into this framework. Set in a speculative Toronto reclaimed by nature, the work reimagines urban space through the lens of Anishinaabe language and land-based knowledge. Resurgence here means Indigenous-led renewal of language, law, and everyday governance. Participation involves witnessing a resurgence. Cultural continuity emerges as a sensory and political presence. Users engage as guests, guided by Indigenous cosmologies and temporalities. Relationality becomes the ethical ground of interaction.

Supreme Law (Cizek, 2019) centers civic education through a layered interface that combines archival footage, interactive sequences, and pedagogical framing. Users explore Canada's 1982 Constitution through decisions that shape tempo and focus. The project presents constitutional history as a process open to critique and revision. Participation invites sustained inquiry into the formation of politics.

Together, these works enact participatory storytelling as a civic practice. They embed public values into their structure and resist instrumental interactivity. Each design fosters ambiguity, ethical attention, and accountability. Users are addressed as members of a civic public, not as consumers. This design logic reflects the Canadian aporetic condition, defined by ongoing tensions among cultural pluralism, ecological responsibility, and settler colonial legacies (Bessai, 2024). Within this context, storytelling enables reflective engagement. Participatory design becomes a form of public pedagogy that sustains ethical encounters with history, power, and possibility.

The next subsection examines how accessibility and inclusion shape this participatory model, emphasizing how NFBC design strategies enable meaningful engagement across diverse publics.

5.2 Accessibility and inclusion in digital storytelling

Accessibility and inclusion function as aesthetic and ethical foundations in the NFBC's digital storytelling. These principles shape how narratives engage diverse publics, foster participation, and affirm lived experience. The NFBC embeds these

commitments through tempo, tone, and cultural specificity, designing narrative forms grounded in presence, difference, and relational awareness. These strategies expand storytelling to include audiences whom dominant media and interface design have historically excluded.

Biidaaban: First Light (Jackson, 2018) imagines a speculative Toronto animated by Indigenous resurgence and ecological renewal. Jackson, 3D Creationist, and Jam3 developed the project to immerse users in a city where medicinal plants reclaim urban space, rivers flow through streets, and Anishinaabemowin signage shapes orientation. The creators avoid gamification. They design movement to require attention and presence. The immersive experience maintains focus without relying on spectacle. The form embeds inclusion by positioning users as guests within a space shaped by layered voices and cyclical temporalities that shift the sense of linear progress. The narrative frames accessibility through relational design, encouraging humility and attunement to others.

The Space We Hold (Hsiung et al., 2017) carries this ethic through testimony. A companion to *The Apology*, the project centers on the voices of three survivors of Japanese wartime sexual slavery. Its interface uses duration, care, and restraint. Long takes and minimal prompts slow attention to match the intensity of the testimony. Viewers must listen with presence. Accessibility shapes design and development: archival sources, consent protocols, and historical framing protect the narrative and affirm participation as an ethical form of witnessing.

Both projects integrate accessibility directly into their design. Voice, pacing, and cultural grounding shape how users engage. These elements form an inclusive public. The rhythm and tone carry accessibility and inclusion as foundational qualities. Inclusion takes shape through sustained attention and relational care. This design ethic aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, defined by the tension among pluralist aspirations, settler colonial legacies, and epistemic justice (Bessai, 2024). *Biidaaban* and *The Space We Hold* do not resolve this dynamic – they render it legible. Inclusion becomes civic accountability through witnessing and recognition. Public storytelling emerges as a participatory practice anchored in dignity and complexity.

5.3 Expanding art as a public service in the digital age

The NFBC's digital storytelling affirms that publicly accountable art can sustain cultural practices independent of market imperatives. Storytelling, under this mandate, functions as civic infrastructure. It supports plurality, fosters reflexivity, and extends engagement beyond immediate consumption. Within a digital environment dominated by attention economies and platform logic, the NFBC configures narrative as a shared ethical encounter rooted in visibility, responsibility, and collective meaning.

Do Not Track (Gaylor, 2015) exemplifies this orientation through its critical lens on surveillance. Directed by Brett Gaylor and co-produced with Upian and ARTE, the web documentary uses each viewer's browser data to personalize the experience. Participation becomes a mode of self-confrontation as users navigate the architecture of their exposure. This design supports civic awareness, prompting reflection on one's role within digital infrastructures. The project avoids data monetization, algorithmic tracking, and audience segmentation, opting instead for a transparent and ethical interface. Enabled by the NFBC's institutional structure, *Do Not Track* interrogates digital capitalism without replicating its logic. This condition supports civic storytelling economies grounded in responsibility, where reach remains meaningful but not primary.

Supreme Law (Cizek, 2019) extends this model by turning constitutional discourse into participatory media. Created by the English-language digital studio, it presents Canada's 1982 Constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms through animated scenarios, voiced commentaries, archival material, and interactive quizzes. These components form a field of inquiry. The project encourages deliberation, places law in public history, and frames constitutional knowledge as provisional and shaped by civic experience.

The NFBC sustains this work through its public mandate and institutional position. As a federally funded agency, it operates within pressures shaped by national pluralism, economic constraint, and evolving media culture. These tensions structure the Canadian aporetic condition—a dynamic marked by concurrent demands for inclusivity, sovereignty, and neoliberal discipline (Bessai, 2024). NFBC initiatives reflect this condition through their formal choices and narrative strategies. Do Not Track and Supreme Law open space for civic encounters, addressing the audience as a public and measuring influence through resonance, reflection, and long-form memory.

This model challenges the disposability common in digital culture. It affirms that public values can guide digital storytelling as a sustained democratic practice. Through aesthetic coherence, ethical focus, and institutional grounding, NFBC digital projects enact a cultural democracy built on care, relevance, and accountability.

6. Conclusion

The NFBC's digital storytelling defines public service as a cultural practice. Its projects activate civic engagement, interpretive labour, and accountability. Through works such as *Bear 71*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, *The Space We Hold*, *Do Not Track*, and *Supreme Law*, the NFBC positions art as a form of infrastructure. These narratives make contradiction visible, hold tension in relation, and invite participation through ethical design. Each initiative constructs conditions for public reflection, shaping how audiences encounter pluralism, sovereignty, and surveillance within contemporary Canada.

This institutional practice operates within the Canadian aporetic condition, where national identity, ecological urgency, and cultural diversity intersect without resolution (Bessai, 2024). NFBC productions engage this complexity without simplification. Their design encourages openness; their form supports reflection. In cultural democracy, they propose a values-based approach to media engagement. Interactivity functions as civic intimacy. Publics emerge through sustained participation, not market alignment. This approach appears most clearly in the NFBC's interactive production practice, where the narrative becomes a shared social experience (National Film Board of Canada, 2016).

Against a media ecosystem structured by extraction and commodification, the NFBC models a different path. Its commitment to public ethics informs both production and distribution. These projects do not replicate dominant digital structures; they reconfigure them. Through institutional support, narrative experimentation, and civic attention, the NFBC demonstrates how art can function as a democratic infrastructure – one that creates space for reflection, plural expression, and shared responsibility. These projects demonstrate institutional capacity; structural contradictions endure beyond them. The NFBC's digital storytelling models public service as a cultural practice while remaining inside Canada's unresolved contradictions.

References

Allison, L., & Mendes, J. (2012). *Bear 71* [Interactive documentary]. National Film Board of Canada. https://bear71.nfb.ca/

Andrejevic, M. (2007). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. University Press of Kansas.

Bessai, J. W. (2024). Art as a public service: The National Film Board of Canada's role in shaping democratic dialogues and societal transformation [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Trent University.

Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.

Cizek, K. (2019). Supreme law [Interactive web experience]. National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/supreme_law

Couldry, N., & Curran, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

Darveau, V. (2014, September 18). *An insider's look at the NFB interactive studio in Montreal*. NFB Blog. https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2014/09/18/interactive-studio-montreal/

Douglas, S. (2014). Circa 1948 [Interactive application]. National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/circa_1948

Druick, Z. (2007). *Projecting Canada: Government policy and documentary film at the National Film Board*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Duverneix, T., & Sweeney, H. (2012). A journal of insomnia [Web site]. National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/a_journal_of_insomnia

Evans, G. (1991). *In the national interest: A chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989*. University of Toronto Press.

Gaylor, B. (2015). Do Not Track [Interactive web documentary series]. National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/do_not_track

Gittings, C. E. (2002). *Canadian national cinema: Ideology, difference and representation*. Routledge.

Hsiung, T., Kang, C., & Lee, P. (2017). The space we hold [Interactive web experience]. Cult Leader & National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/the_space_we_hold_en

Jackson, L. (2018). Biidaaban: First Light [Virtual reality experience]. National Film Board of Canada. https://collection.nfb.ca/interactive/biidaaban_first_light

James, C. R. (1977). Film as a national art: The NFB of Canada and the film board idea. Arno Press.

Magder, T. (1993). *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian state and feature films*. University of Toronto Press.

Morris, P. (1989). Praxis into process: John Grierson and the National Film Board of Canada. Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, *9*(3), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/01439688900260261

Murray, A. (2016). *The Omni-Americans: Some alternatives to the folklore of white supremacy*. Library of America.

National Film Board of Canada. (2014, December 3). What is the National Film Board of Canada (NFB)? https://help.nfb.ca/knowledge-base/what-is-the-national-film-board-of-canada-nfb/

National Film Board of Canada. (2016, April 29). NFB digital pioneer Rob McLaughlin returns to Vancouver's Digital Studio: Responsible for many of the NFB's biggest interactive hits, McLaughlin takes over for Loc Dao as studio head [Press release]. https://mediaspace.nfb.ca/comm/nfb-digital-pioneer-rob-mclaughlin-returns-to-vancouvers-digital-studio-responsible-for-many-of-the-nfbs-biggest-interactive-hits-mclaughlin-takes-over-for-loc-dao-as-studio-head/

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Rodriguez, C. (2001). *Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media*. Hampton Press.

Van Dijck, J. (2007). *Mediated memories in the digital age*. Stanford University Press.

Waugh, T., Baker, M., & Winton, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Challenge for change: Activist documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Aleksandra Różalska, University of Łódź, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.42-54

Teenagers and Youth Cultures in American Television: Reception Analysis of *Glee* and *Euphoria*

ABSTRACT
The article examines contemporary depictions of youth and teenagers in post-millennial American television and their reception by critics and viewers. Traditionally, television tackled challenges and problems young people have to face in a two-fold and simplistic way, focusing on either radically pejorative situations and behaviors (crime, drugs, sex) or on superficially cheerful scenarios (entertainment, gossip, having fun) (Buckingham, 2021; Hebdige, 1988). The author analyzes the reviews of two television shows, *Glee* and *Euphoria*, which – although representing different genres and narrating different experiences – are acclaimed for offering more complex and authentic representations of teenagers by addressing issues that are often marginalized, tabooized, or even absent in contemporary American television discourses.

KEYWORDS
teenagers; television series; reception; youth; quality television; *Glee*; *Euphoria*

1. Introduction

Drawing from youth studies and contemporary critiques of the representation of youth within television studies, in this article I examine critics' reception of two American shows: *Glee* (2009–2015) and *Euphoria* (2019–2022). These series – although broadcast in two different decades in the post-millennial era and representing different genres – are acclaimed by audiences for complex and authentic depictions of teenagers and changing the discourse on youth through detabooization of certain problems and "youthification" of the narrative (Hagedoorn et al., 2021; Sundet, 2021). I have chosen these particular American teen dramas as they exemplify two different tendencies in how youth cultures are televised: a more optimistic vision (*Glee*) and a more gloomy one (*Euphoria*). Their protagonist is collective, revealing shared experiences and common identities[1]. Both shows tackle

[1] That is why other TV series, such as *13 Reasons Why* (2017–2020), are not examined in this paper, although they provide an in-depth insight into contemporary teen problems, e.g., mental health conditions or bullying.

Aleksandra Różalska, Katedra Badań Kulturowych, Wydział Filologiczny, Uniwersytet Łódzki, ul. Pomorska 171/173, 90-236 Łódź, aleksandra.rozalska@uni.lodz.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7725-3573

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

– although in a completely different manner – important social and emotional challenges adolescents face nowadays: forming an identity, facing intimacy and romantic relationships, discovering sexuality, understanding difficult everyday relations with friends, parents, and teachers, and violent behaviors (e.g., bullying) (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, p. 95). While *Glee* has been praised for its focus on minority groups and normalizing queer identities, *Euphoria*'s unmoralizing approach to sexual relationships and complicated depiction of substance abuse were appreciated both by viewers and critics. Although focusing on youth, they both refer to important American contexts: identity politics, political correctness, rape culture, and the opioid crisis.

2. Ways of representing youth in the media: "youth-as-fun" vs. "youth-as-trouble"

Youth has been the term evoking ambiguous feelings, and its characteristics are shaped by our own personal experiences, memories, and projections from childhood and adolescence. David Buckingham defines it as an unstable and vague stage between "innocent" childhood and "mature" adulthood – difficult to understand and tame, frightening and fascinating at the same time. Consequently, "Youth are often represented as a problem to be solved, an inchoate force in need of discipline and control. And yet equally, they are often used as a vehicle for adult fantasies of energy, creativity, and freedom" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 3). Therefore, youth (both boyhood and girlhood) – a transgression, a passage between childhood and adulthood – is perceived both as empowerment and liberation, and as ambivalent and dangerous (Kenny, 2023, p. 161). Thus understood, youth inscribes itself in – what Dick Hebdige (1988) calls – "the politics of discomfit" (p. 18), which associates teenagerhood with feelings of strangeness, uneasiness, mysteriousness, and confusion.

Following the same logic, television has traditionally depicted teenagers and young adults in a twofold way – either as "youth-as-fun" or "youth-as-trouble", which Hebdige analyzes in his book *Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display* (1988). This dichotomous way of representing was examined by scholars of British cultural studies, who studied press releases, films, television news, and photography.

On the one hand, young people are shown as a dangerous social group, juvenile offenders often involved in some kind of illegal activity, skipping school, and behaving irrationally, which makes parents and teachers completely powerless and incapable of communicating with them and controlling them (Taylor & Willis, 2006). In television series, youth subcultures and teenagers are also linked to crime and violence, getting involved in dangerous situations, drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviors (e.g., initiating sexual practices too early or without consent), and disregard for social rules, which serves as a justification for their

surveillance and controlling measures undertaken by adults and law enforcement (Buckingham, 2019; Hebdige, 1988).

On the other hand, teenagers crave fun, leisure, and entertainment; thus, they are often represented as hedonistic, liberated, crazy and careless, fashionable and trendy, spontaneous, and unpredictable (Taylor & Willis, 2006). Young people are fascinated with consumption goods (buying clothes and beauty products) and partying (including drinking alcohol and experimenting with drugs). They put friends and their social environment above parents, family, and school. The latter is rather a place for socializing, showing up, pretending to be someone else, and aspiring to be popular and accepted. Importantly, the images in this context concentrate on "the body – on appearance, posture, dress" (Hebdige, 1988, p. 31), and the obsession with one's look is taken up by many television series, including *Glee* and *Euphoria*. Not only is visual and sexual attractiveness of key importance, but also coming to terms with one's gender and sexual identity, which is the topic *Glee* and *Euphoria* problematize[2].

This dichotomous discourse between a vulnerable/lost and autonomous/empowered teenager reflects the simplistic perception of young people based on generalizations and binary oppositions that do not correspond to reality but are social constructs "influenced by historical, social, and economic factors" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, p. 27). As David Buckingham (2021) contends, "The idea of youth has a considerable symbolic potency. It is typically associated with notions of energy, idealism, and physical beauty; yet it is also frequently represented as both trouble and troubling" (p. 23).

Until the 2000s, there were few interdisciplinary studies on youth and media, the majority of which focused on television's negative influence on teenagers, for example, the impact of onscreen violence and aggression on young people's behavior and attitudes (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, p. 4). Scholars affiliated with British cultural studies started to investigate various ways of representing youth, taking into consideration racial, ethnic, and class aspects, e.g., young Black men in television news (Hall et al., 1978), youth subcultures (Hebdige, 1979), and gender and youth cultures (McRobbie, 1991). They paved the way to more complex investigations, going beyond perceiving teenagers as pathological or problematic.

Especially in the new millennium, together with the emergence of "quality television", these stereotypical representations of adolescents have gradually started to change. Some narratives find a way to transgress the above-mentioned dualistic portrayal by showing "youth-as-trouble-as-fun", while others give voice

[2] The analysis of other shows, such as the British TV series *Sex Education* (2019–2023), can be found in: Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. (2021). More on "heterosexual script" in primetime television in: Kim et al. (2007).

to teenagers themselves and focus on their shifting identities, search for sexual pleasure, (toxic) intimate relationships, the lack of understanding from adults/parents, the role of social media in young people's lives, as well as consequences of drug addiction. Depicting teenagers through "youth-as-trouble-as-fun" debunks and contests the myth of "innocent" adolescence and unfettered play related to it by showing, for example, the loneliness, lostness, alienation, abandonment, and insecurity they experience on an everyday basis. Furthermore, it allows us to reflect upon the repercussions of unleashed fun, unprotected sex, and unlimited substance abuse: teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health problems, addictions, etc.[3].

The new quality of these shows relies, firstly, on a youth-centered perspective: "marginalizing teachers and parents and avoiding obvious moral lessons" as well as problematizing "risky aspects of teenage life – sex, drugs, violence, and the wild pursuit of pleasure – as largely taken-for-granted, everyday realities" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 2). Second, as both *Glee* and *Euphoria* illustrate in the American context, television series offer issue-based stories (p. 7), focusing on authentic and particular problems: emotional doubts and stress in finding gender and sexual identity, peer pressure and influence, various kinds of violence (from bullying and cyberviolence through sexual violence to domestic abuse), mental illness and consequences thereof, alcohol and drug addictions, uncertainty and unpredictability of romantic and sexual relationships, uneasy bonds with adults (parents, teachers, and mentors) and conflicting attitudes towards them: between evading them and seeking their attention and acceptance.

These three elements – youth-centeredness, issue-based stories, and avoiding "didactic moralizing" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 7) – made the images of youth more credible, realistic, and authentically reflective of their complex experiences and everyday difficult struggles, doubts, and uncertainties inscribed in adolescence.

In the remaining parts of the article, I will focus on how *Glee* and *Euphoria* are received by critics and what novel ways of portraying teenagers, beyond "youth-as-fun-as-trouble," they include in their narratives. To this end, I choose two different topics – queer representation (*Glee*) and substance abuse (*Euphoria*) – to talk about diverse impacts these shows have on audiences.

[3] In this paper, I focus on how these novel ways of representing teenagers are reflected in American television shows (on two examples). I have chosen *Glee* and *Euphoria* as they narrate two topics important from the perspective of American youth cultures, i.e., queer identities and drug addiction. I am aware that some non-American productions, such as the British teen drama *Skins* (2007–2013) or the Norwegian series *Skam* (2015–2017), revolutionized images of youth and paved the way for *Glee* and *Euphoria*. The British *Sex Education* has also not been selected for my analysis, although I recognize its role in the detabooization of teenage sex and intimate relationships. More on other youth-centered television productions in: Rosinska (2024).

3. *Glee*: queering American suburbs

Glee is a six-season FOX television series combining different genres – musical, comedy, and melodrama with kitschy and campy elements – taking place in a fictional William McKinley High School in Lima, Ohio. Its main protagonists belong to a club called the New Directions, led by a Spanish teacher, Will Schuester (Mr. Schue). The common denominator for the glee club's members – which proves to be attractive for viewers – is that they are in a position of exclusion for various reasons: sexual identity, disability, interests, family issues, ethnicity, non-white and non-heteronormative identities, etc. (Dubrofsky, 2013). Most members of the glee club are marked as different, unpopular at school, unaccepted by peers, socially mismatched and marginalized, and often lonely and miserable misfits. Yet, they are undeniably talented "losers", always standing in opposition to the popular majority and harassed by their peers and some teachers (Coach Sue Silvester) (De Lira & Cabral Ferreira, 2022). However, the club is also of interest to so-called school "stars": football players and cheerleaders, who – frustrated, uncomfortable in their roles, struggling with many problems – seek meaning, relief, and a sense of belonging outside their normative spaces. Regardless of their motivation to be part of the glee club, its members find ways to express their sentiments and conflicting desires and share difficult emotions (anger, shame, sadness) through music, singing, and dancing to often complicated choreography. As *Glee* co-creator, Brad Falchuk (*We're All Gleeks…*, 2009), summarizes it, "Every teenager feels a wanting, a desire for something more, to be heard, to be seen. […] I think the show is working for people of all ages, though, because that feeling never really goes away".

Audiences appreciated *Glee*'s musical and theatrical means of expression, which provide agency and subjectivity to otherwise silenced and invisible protagonists, offering some comfort and remedy to the audience for many ills teenagers have to confront (Shade et al., 2015, pp. 4–5). Singing and dancing are shown as glamourous, visually attractive, fancy, and colorful, creating the world of fantasy built on otherness, strangeness, and exclusion that compensates for the everyday hardships of the members of the glee club, who are rejected and discriminated against regularly: "Oppression is made commonplace and normalized, part of the everyday experience of any teenager's life, with the suggestion that overcoming […] oppression is akin to overcoming one's awkward teen years and learning to celebrate one's uniqueness" (Dubrofsky, 2013, p. 98). *Glee* breaks from traditional heteronormative or assimilationist television discourse on queerness and "uses its LGBT characters and narratives to focus instead on evolving issues of identity, community, desire, and homophobia" (Sarkissian, 2014, p. 154).

The glee club is a community – sometimes supportive, sometimes conflicted – providing space where the notions of equality, acceptance, and respect are constantly redefined and negotiated as well as offering new possibilities for

exchanging experiences, collaboratively working together, and learning to appreciate differences and other people's flaws or deficiencies. As Jacobs (2014) contends, such understanding of the glee-community links

> the various kinds of "what's really inside" in chains of equivalence and substitution: for *Glee*'s "different" kids, gayness is disability is racial difference is shyness is social awkwardness is poverty. The objective is less to appreciate the particular challenges accompanying these details of identity and experience than to create a compelling blend, a harmony in which individual tones sound together and constitute a kind of difference that is shared, the same. (p. 328)

Glee club, which often provides an escape from various family problems, makes room for something that families fail to deliver: empowerment, a sense of belonging and indispensability, and unconditional acceptance according to the rule: "We are different together, each of us is a weirdo, but we are strange together".

Critics particularly appreciate *Glee*'s queer characters and the way they develop throughout the show: "Where *Glee* does a great deal of productive cultural work is in queering that traditional narrative temporality through its visibly abundant, regular queer characters and their high-profile story arcs that emphasize the irresolute and enduring nature of queer youth experiences" (Sarkissian, 2014, p. 153–154). By oing so, it includes a wide variety of audiences to take pleasure from watching the show: "Queer viewers are explicitly invited to identify with queer characters and be validated by these characters' experiences, just as straight viewers are invited to recognize models for correct and incorrect treatment of young gays and lesbians" (Jacobs, 2014, p. 320). *Glee* shows different queer characters (Kurt Hummel, Santana Lopez, Brittany Pierce, and Blaine Anderson), their diverse processes of coming to terms with their sexual identity, different approaches to the idea of coming out, and varying family reactions and support they get from their parents and friends. Thereby, it questions "one-sided discourse of the helpless gay teen victim" (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 19). The variety of experiences that *Glee* reflects upon is one of the most appreciated by viewers aspects of the show:

> On the one hand, the series consolidates the image of gay teens as victims and represents the viability of being a homonormative teen. On the other hand, it challenges the power of heteronormativity by exposing how it governs the life of both gay and straight teens and by paying attention to the queer aspects of gay teenage life. Even though *Glee* pushes certain homonormative aspirations and omits a structural discussion of heteronormativity in the regulation of homophobia, it resists the idea that growing up gay can only happen through a process of struggle and success or through homonormative assimilation. (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 18)

However, there is also some criticism about queer characters, especially of how bisexual and sexually fluid protagonists (for instance, Santana Lopez) are depicted and of the so-called "imperative of the coming out ritual in order to live one's authentic and true self" (Miller, 2014, p. 31). The main problem here is that,

according to some critics, sexuality is understood in *Glee* as a social construct and a fixed characteristic, which leaves no space for not-knowing, for exploration, or for celebrating the continuum of undefined and fluid sexual identities. As Miller (2014) explains, "little room is left for the true development of bisexual characters, those questioning their orientation, or those who subscribe to a queer sexual fluidity that resists essentialism" (p. 24). Throughout the narrative, bisexual characters or those who do not want to put fixed labels on their identity are encouraged to come out, to reveal their "true self" to the world, and to define their orientation – it is implied that this is the only way to be happy and empowered, to have strength facing homophobia and bullying, and to publicly embrace the queer experience. The problem is that sometimes coming out is not possible due to various complex circumstances, nor is it desired: "This is not to suggest that there is not power in visibility, or to romanticize shame, but to argue that what is missing in such narratives is […] an account of the broader social structures, which limit such 'choices'" (McNicolas Smith, 2020, p. 127).

These critiques are, in my opinion, legitimate, as *Glee* indeed insists on celebrating fixed identities of being either gay/lesbian or straight, choosing a safer, blander, a bit moralistic, conservative, uncontroversial path to reflect upon the experiences of queer people and focusing on the coming-out narratives leading to same-sex marriages in the final season. Despite those limitations, however, I agree with some reviews emphasizing that "*Glee* is explicitly invested in the tolerance project that constitutes a central strand of contemporary LGBTQ+ rights" (McNicolas Smith, 2020, p. 122) and it "prioritizes an ethics of compassion" over problematizing the limits of inclusion (p. 142). It has also been appraised and used by educators to sensitize about the experiences of LGBTQAI+ communities: "*Glee* has important implications for teachers and LGBT and non-LGBT youths. […] *Glee* has the power to dismantle hurtful, discriminatory practices and language, replacing them with accepting, inclusive dialogue and actions" (Falter, 2014, pp. 295–296).

These educational and positive aspects of youth cultures, as well as a narrative space given to queer identities in *Glee*, are valued by critics and viewers, as they offer a fairytale-like story with happy endings and optimistic scenarios for its diverse characters. *Euphoria* provides a much more realistic, graphic, and edgy representation of "youth-as-trouble-as-fun" with all its ugly details and far-reaching consequences. Unlike *Glee*, it leaves the audience hopeless and confused about the contemporary challenges and traumas that youth are confronted with every day.

4. *Euphoria*: demythologizing youth and drug abuse

Euphoria is a two-season HBO MAX teen drama adapted from an Israeli series that follows the logic of the "youth-centered" narratives (with the main character, Rue Bennett, as an inner voice) through adopting a "teenage gaze" (Cole, 2023,

p. 73), but its target audience is also adults, for whom watching this show can be a very challenging experience (Gersz, 2019)[4]. Similar to *Glee*, *Euphoria* tells a story of American high schoolers set in California; however, unlike *Glee*, it is very dark and disturbing, as it does not use humor, satire, and irony to ease or bring some relief to the audience. It received ambiguous reviews about graphic scenes of sex and nudity, drug abuse, and sexual violence, which are used to illustrate various problems the protagonists have to face: drug addiction and overdose, the opioid crisis, drug dealing and accessibility, mental health issues, excessive violence (bullying, sexual abuse, psychological harassment, etc.), getting into intimate and sexual relationships (Noor Qolbi et al., 2022), pornography, toxic masculinity (Kućmierz, 2019), body shaming and harsh beauty standards, family crises, and complete disengagement from and neglect of teenagers by their parents and other caretakers.

The show depicts these problems and trauma connected therewith, not offering easy and superficial solutions and avoiding moralizing. As one of the reviewers contends, "Substance use and other extreme content in *Euphoria* is portrayed as a harsh reality, rather than a pleasant experience" (Medina, 2023, p. 2). Another adds, "*Euphoria* basically concludes that being a teenager is like living in hell. Each protagonist experiences some sort of trauma. […] The creators manage to find the existential element in the horror of becoming adolescent that we all share" (Kućmierz, 2019)[5].

The show is also acclaimed for its portrayal of trans and bisexual people (Masanet et al., 2022), which *Glee* lacks, according to some critics. As Paige Macintosh (2022) points out, "*Euphoria* ultimately grounds its representation of youth culture in gender-queer practices that reframe trans identity as an authentic celebration of self that remains congruent with Gen Z culture and essential to a developing Gen Z aesthetic" (p. 15).

Unlike in *Glee*, where the club members rework their problems through singing, dancing, and artistically expressing their feelings, which is empowering and healing, *Euphoria*'s characters constantly struggle with their emotions and experience the world extremely and deeply, always caught between authenticity and fakery. What all of them have in common is an ultimate, profound loneliness and solitude. The latter are deeply hidden as young people are excessively present in the fake realm of social media, they party wildly (taking all sorts of drugs, drinking, and having sex) as if there is no tomorrow, and they have an all-or-nothing attitude toward romantic relationships and friendships.

[4] I am using some reviews (e.g., Gersz, Kućmierz) from popular and journalistic sources (Internet platforms and blogs) to show how *Euphoria* was received by the audience.

[5] All translations from Polish into English are mine.

The series' creator, Barry Levinson, is interested in youth's subjective, complicated state of mind and their – often exaggerated, conflicted, unstable, volumed-up, and intense – emotions: "*Euphoria*'s protagonists feel everything more" (Kućmierz, 2019). *Euphoria* shows that "in the lives of teenagers the conversion from exultation to cruelty, from carelessness to aggression might be short and abrupt" (Jedliński, 2022).

According to many critics, the strongest element of *Euphoria* is its complex and sincere take on drug-taking and substance use (Medina, 2023) and their devastating consequences to one of the main protagonists, her family, and those surrounding her (Jedliński, 2022). Levinson, an ex-addict himself, made Rue's addiction the central plot of the show, creating, especially in season 2, an extremely truthful, graphic, and detailed representation of getting high; failed rehab; Rue's clever ways – lying, cheating, breaking the law, and manipulating her friends – to get access to drugs; withdrawal syndrome with all of its ugly, bodily, and psychotic elements; sobering up and collapsing anew; aggression (physical, verbal, and emotional) toward the close ones; and suicidal thoughts as well as taking drugs as the process of slow and painful "dying".

The show explains the reasons for Rue's addiction (mental health issues – ADHD, depression, anxiety disorder, and bipolar disease – as well as losing her father to cancer at a young age) and provides an uncensored story of her long and traumatic path to a fragile recovery:

> The series effectively depicts that drug addiction is everywhere and does not have *per se* a recognizable face. In other words, it is a disease that does not discriminate across race, class, or gender. *Euphoria* assertively humanizes the struggles with addiction and opposes previous narratives in which addiction can be overcome through support from families, sponsors, friends, etc., as it depicts, more often than not, occasions of failure and defeat. This realistic tone states that drug addicts can be manipulators and drug abuse can wreck someone's closest relationships. […] Thus, it shows that addiction is not an easy fix or something that can be overcome overnight and that even the most determined recovering addicts can easily fall back into a vicious cycle of drug use. (Lopera-Mármol & Jiménez-Morales, 2023, pp. 76–77)

Written through a teenage gaze, offering "a spectacularization of youth" (Cole, 2023, p. 78), and avoiding didacticism and preaching, "*Euphoria* uses explicitly visual ways to depict addiction as complete obedience to a force that is both unseen and larger than oneself" (Cole, 2023, p. 75). Such images of substance abuse, especially in season 1, were criticized for over-aestheticizing, glamorizing, and even glorifying drug-taking (Gersz, 2022; Medina, 2023). Drug trips are often represented in a visually attractive way – their beauty is non-obvious and ephemeral, "narcotic, magnetic, frantic" (Gersz 2019). While high, Rue is ultimately happy, calm, and blissfully oblivious; her hallucinations are like music videos – hypnotic, visionary, colorful, full of glitter, neon shine, and surreal

lighting – or like crazy parties when youth listen to rhythmic music, dance, and seemingly forget about the world, the sadness, and the loss. Music and dancing serve a completely different purpose than in *Glee*; it is not about being seen and included, it is about forgetting and escaping. Drugs are the titular euphoria shared by Rue and many of her college friends.

However, season 2 breaks up with this illusory and tempting image of drug taking by depicting it in "a naturalistic and devastating way, which is rather rare in popular culture" (Gersz, 2022), detabooizing it, and showing the horrific consequences of substance abuse. In episodes 5 and 6[6], we are eyewitnesses to "Rue's hitting rock bottom, and watching her breakdown and demise is extremely painful for the viewer" (Jedliński, 2022). The reading of these scenes is straightforward: drugs are hell.

Some critics appreciated what the show does to the viewer: "Entertainment like *Euphoria* can engender a complex and nuanced understanding of drug addiction and engender sympathy for those caught up in addiction" (Gierzynski et al., 2024, p. 207). The audience also sympathizes with Rue's relatives (her mom, Leslie, and younger sister, Gia) and friends (Jules and Ali), who care for her deeply but are completely helpless and left alone to deal with her addiction and overdose. It is obvious that drugs "gradually ruin lives not only of victims, but also of their codependent families" (Jedliński, 2022).

5. Conclusions

After reading numerous reviews and analyzing particular plots of the two shows, I believe that both *Glee* and *Euphoria* – in completely different ways, using different conventions, artistic styles, and perspectives, and appealing to various aspects of youth cultures and teenage experiences – move away from stereotypical, simplified, and schematic modes of representing adolescence and adult-becoming based on the dichotomous logic of "youth-as-fun" and "youth-as-trouble" described in subsection 2.

As was underlined by many critics cited in this article, *Glee* was appreciated for including queer minorities in the school community and affirming their identities through artistic expression. Music, performance, and dance provide the protagonists with an opportunity to escape from the harsh teenage reality and come out as their true selves. On the other hand, a favorable reception of *Euphoria*'s take on drug addiction indicates that it is attractive to various audiences, both young and adult, to watch an authentic and uncensored picture of substance abuse. What was particularly appealing to viewers was, in my opinion, linking drug-taking to "an adolescent sense of being lost, uncertainty of tomorrow, and desperate

[6] S02E05 "Stand Still Like the Hummingbird" and S02E06 "A Thousand Little Trees of Blood" (2022).

struggle for acceptance and love" (Jedliński, 2022) and making it an existential crisis caused by various personal, social, and psychological factors.

Both *Glee* and *Euphoria*, broadcast in different decades of the 21st century, attracted a lot of attention and built a significant fandom for their ambiguity and multilayeredness, as well as their attempt to depict youth in a complex and sophisticated way, beyond the dichotomous opposition of fun and trouble. They inscribe themselves in a recent trend meaning "that certain segments of the American television landscape have become progressively more sexually explicit, more violent, or even more queer" (Owens, 2019, p. 5). Including such plots, oftentimes marginalized or silenced in the past in youth-centered productions, contributed to the popularity of both shows.

They require, however, different kinds of engagement from viewers and impact them in different ways. *Glee* invites, for example, to contest the use of stereotypes and fixed identities:

> Race, gender, sexuality, and disability are mobilized in *Glee* as sites of difference and struggle. However, *Glee*'s complex evocation of stereotypes works in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce. […] *Glee* repeats the problematic "post" sensibility in multiple ways, reproducing, even as it posits itself as transforming, continued inequalities. (McNicolas Smith, 2020, p. 130)

Euphoria, on the other hand, creates "empathy and love for Rue's character over the two seasons […] as well as demonstrates the darker sides of drug addiction" (Gierzynski et al., 2024, p. 194). *Glee* offers hope and concrete solutions to youth's problems, whereas *Euphoria* leaves the viewer with Rue's fragile and uncertain recovery and a rather limited promise for overcoming the hardships of adolescence.

Finally, critics point to the wider influence of these shows on audiences. The "*Glee* effect" consists in shaping young viewers' attitudes toward marginalized groups, especially LGBTQAI+ identities, and fostering their understanding and acceptance of inclusive social practices (Shade, 2015). The "*Euphoria* effect", investigated, for example, by Gierzynski et al. (2024), reveals a correlation between exposure to the show's depictions of drug abuse and attitudes on drug policies in the US. Evidently, fictional stories about teenagers and youth cultures have various kinds of impacts on spectators that should be further analyzed, taking into consideration their psychological, social, and political contexts.

References

Buckingham, D. (2019). *Skins and the impossibility of youth television*. https://davidbuckingham.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/skins-and-youth-television.pdf.

Buckingham, D. (2021). *Youth on screen : representing young people in film and television*. Polity Books.

Cole, L. (2023). The Contemporary Aesthetics of Adolescence: How *Euphoria* uses style to spectacularize representation of modern youth in the articulation of a teenage gaze. *The Motley Undergraduate Journal, 1*(1), 58–82. https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/muj.v1i1.76165

De Lira, E. S., & Cabral Ferreira, B. (2022). Representation and minorities: the uses of (im)politeness in the TV series *Glee*. *Revista (Con)Textos Linguísticos*, *16*(33), 188–207. https://doi.org/10.47456/cl.v16i33.37692

Dhaenens, F. (2013). Teenage Queerness: Negotiating Heteronormativity in the Representation of Gay Teenagers in *Glee*. *Journal of Youth Studies, 16*(3), 304–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.718435

Dubrofsky, R. E. (2013) Jewishness, Whiteness, and Blackness on *Glee*: Singing to the Tune of Postracism. *Culture & Critique*, *6*, 82–102. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12002

Falter, M. M. (2014). "You're Wearing Kurt's Necklace!" The Rhetorical Power of *Glee* in the Literacy Classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *57*(4), 289–297. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.243

Gersz, O. (2019). Seks, narkotyki, nastolatki. *Euforia* HBO to serial, którego wolałbyś nie oglądać, ale nie możesz przestać [Sex, drugs, teenagers. *Euphoria* HBO is a TV series you would prefer not to watch but you cannot stop]. *Na:Temat.* https://natemat.pl/276265,euforia-na-hbo-zendaya-gra-w-mocnym-serialu-o-wspolczesnych-nastolatkach

Gersz, O. (2022). *Euforia* niszczy moje zdrowie psychiczne i nie chcę jej już oglądać. Tyle że i tak to robię [*Euphoria* ruins my mental health and I do not want to watch in anymore. But I do it anyway]. *Na:Temat.* https://natemat.pl/397795,euforia-niszczy-moje-zdrowie-psychiczne

Gierzynski, A., Blaber, M., Brown, M., Feldman, S., Gottschalk, H., Hodin, P., & Hoechner, E. (2024). The *Euphoria* Effect: A Popular HBO Show, Gen Z, and Drug Policy Beliefs. *Social Science Quarterly, 105*, 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13351

Hagedoorn, B., Eichner, S., & Gutiérrez Lozano, J. F. (2021). The "youthification" of television. *Critical Studies in Television*, *16*(2), 83–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/17496020211011804

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State, and Law and Order.* Macmillan.

Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture. The meaning of style*. Routledge.

Hebdige, D. (1988*). Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display*. Routledge.

Jacobs, J., (2014). Raising Gays. On *Glee*, Queer Kids, and the Limits of the Family. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *20*(3), 319–352. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2422692

Jedliński, D. (2022). *Euforia*, sezon 2: sceny z życia nastoletniego [*Euphoria*, season 2: scenes from teenage life]. *ONET Film*. https://kultura.onet.pl/film/recenzje/euforia-sezon-2-recenzja-2-sezonu-serialu-hbo-z-zendaya/2r24e8q

Kenny, S. (2023). Youth on Screen: Representing Young People in Film and Television. *Contemporary British History*, *37*(1), 160–161, https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2022.2108411

Kim, J. N., Sorsoli, C. L., Collins, K., Zylbergold, B. A., Schooler, D., & Tolman, D. L. (2007). From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing the Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television. *Journal of Sex Research*, *44*(2), 145–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490701263660

Kućmierz, K. (2019). Seks, trauma i media społecznościowe. O serialu *Euforia* [Sex, trauma and social media. On *Euphoria*]. *Kultura Liberalna, 555*(35). https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/08/27/seks-trauma-i-media-spolecznosciowe-o-serialu-euforia/

Lopera-Mármol, M., & Jiménez-Morales, M. (2023).When Drugs Are No Longer Cool. Coming-of-age Narratives on Addiction from *Skins* to *Euphoria*. *Revista Espańola de Drogodependencias*, *48*(2), 72–82. https://doi.org/10.54108/10047

Macintosh, P. H. (2022). Transgressive TV: *Euphoria*, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic. *Global Storytelling Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, *2*(1), 13–38. https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.1550

Masanet, M.-J., Ventura, R., & Ballesté, E. (2022). Beyond the "Trans Fact"? Trans Representation in the Teen Series *Euphoria*: Complexity, Recognition, and Comfort. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 143–155. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i2.4926

McNicolas Smith, K. (2020). "New Directions": *Glee*, new queer visibility and post- queer. In K. McNicolas Smith (Ed.), *Lesbians on Television: New Queer Visibility & the Lesbian Normal* (pp. 118–143). Intellect.

McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and Youth Culture. From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"*. Macmillan.

Medina, M. (2023). Youth Substance Use Portrayal on TV: Analyzing Euphoria. https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Youth-Substance-Use-Portrayal-on-TV.pdf

Miller, T. C. (2014). Forced Out of the "Flannel Closet". The Coming-Out-Gay Imperative. In M. Parke (Ed.), *Queer in the Choir Room. Essays on Gender and Sexuality in* Glee (pp. 24–37). McFarland & Company.

Noor Qolbi, P. P., Adi Wibowo, S. K., & Fuady, I. (2022). Content Analysis: Relationships and Sexual Behavior in *Euphoria* Series Season One. *Communicare: Journal of Communication Studies*, *9*(2), 115–124. https://doi.org/10.37535/101009220224

Owens, A. J. (2019). Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me: The Ambivalent Queer of Post-network Television. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1602981

Rosinska, O. (2024). Sex, Drugs, and Suicide in Youth-oriented TV Series of Different Countries: Controversial Content and the Level of Acceptability for a Sensitive Audience. *Images*, *37*(46), 93–107. https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2024.37.46.6

Sarkissian, R. (2014). Queering TV Conventions: LGBT Teen Narratives on *Glee*. In C. Pullen (Ed.), *Queer Youth and Media Cultures* (pp. 145–157). Macmillan.

Shade, D., Kim, K., Jung, E.-H., & Oliver M. B. (2015). Using the "New Directions" to Move Media Viewers in the Rights Directions. Examining the Effects of *Glee* Narratives on Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions Towards Stigmatized Groups. In B. C. Johnson, & D. K. Faill (Eds.), Glee *and New Directions for Social Change* (pp. 3–15). Sense Publishers.

Sundet, V. S. (2021). "Youthification" of drama through real-time storytelling: A production study of blank and the legacy of *Skam*. *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies*, *16*(2), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/17496020211005311

Taylor, L., & Willis, A. (2006), *Medioznawstwo. Teksty, instytucje i odbiorcy* [*Media Studies: Texts, Institutions and Audiences*]. Jagiellonian University Press.

Valkenburg, P. M., & Piotrowski, T. (2017). *Plugged In. How Media Attract and Affect Youth*. Yale University Press.

Vázquez-Rodríguez, L.-G., & García-Ramos, F.-H., & Zurian, F. A. (2021). The Role of Popular Culture for Queer Teen Identities' Formation in Netflix's *Sex Education*. *Media and Communication*, *9*(3), 198–208. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i3.4115

We're All Gleeks—10 Questions for Glee Co-Creator Brad Falchuk (2009, December 7). https://www.wired.com/2009/12/were-all-gleeks-10-questions-with-glee-co-creator-brad-falchuk/

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Barbara Miceli, University of Gdansk, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.55-64

Cracks Beneath the Surface: Deconstructing the Myth of the Perfect Suburban Family in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

ABSTRACT
Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere (2017)* dismantles the idealized image of the suburban family, exposing the inequalities concealed by middle-class privilege. Set in the planned community of Shaker Heights, the novel depicts the unraveling of the seemingly perfect Richardson family following their encounter with Mia Warren, an unconventional single mother. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital, this paper analyzes suburban conformity as a marker of moral legitimacy and social power. In dialogue with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, it further examines how family ideals function as fragile social constructs. Ultimately, the article argues that Ng exposes the myth of the "perfect" nuclear family as a mechanism that reproduces exclusion and systemic inequality in contemporary American culture.

KEYWORDS
suburban family; suburbs; performativity; habitus; cultural capital

1. Introduction

In her 2017 novel *Little Fires Everywhere*, American author Celeste Ng offers more than a compelling tale of domestic upheaval – she crafts a sharp sociological critique of suburban America, unmasking the fragile myth of the perfect family. Set against the backdrop of Shaker Heights, Ohio, a community meticulously designed to embody order and progress, in the year 1997, the novel reveals how such carefully engineered environments conceal deep-rooted inequalities and simmering discontent. As the Richardson family's pristine existence is upended by the arrival of Mia Warren – a nomadic artist and single mother of teenage daughter Pearl, who rents and apartment belonging to the Richardsons and eventually works as a domestic aide for them – the illusion of stability and moral superiority begins to fracture. The Richardsons, whose privilege has long gone unexamined, are forced to confront the limits of their worldview, revealing, in Timotheus Vermeulen's (2014) words, "the pretty white picket fence [that] secrets a graveyard" and a suburb (p. 2). When their home ultimately burns to the ground,

Barbara Miceli, Instytut Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Wydział Filologiczny, Uniwersytet Gdański, ul. Wita Stwosza 51, 80-308 Gdańsk, miceli.barbara@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5152-4347

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

and "everyone within half a mile could see the smoke rising" (Ng, 2017, p. 1), it becomes clear that the destruction is more than physical; it is the collapse of an entire constructed identity.

Through its portrayal of the Richardson family and the disruptive presence of Mia Warren, Ng's novel exposes how suburban ideals of perfection are not just personal choices but performances shaped by systemic forces of privilege, cultural capital, and rigid social norms – forces that ultimately render true social mobility and authenticity almost impossible.

The Richardsons' interactions with Mia and Pearl reveal how deeply their *habitus* – the ingrained dispositions shaped by their privileged upbringing – limits their ability to understand or empathize with those outside their social field. As Pierre Bourdieu (2020) argues, the social world is "a space of potential forces, an order of coexistence" that defines individuals by their location within it, and thus their behavior becomes bound by invisible structures (p. 213). Shaker Heights itself functions as such a field, reinforcing specific patterns of thought and exclusion.

The novel also demonstrates how cultural capital becomes a weapon of subtle exclusion. Mia's lack of wealth, stable residence, and conformity to local norms positions her outside the accepted order of Shaker Heights, echoing Bourdieu's (2020) assertion that fields act through "forces of exclusion that render entry difficult" (p. 251). Pearl's desire to fit in and her attraction to the privileges the Richardsons enjoy show how social structures reproduce themselves through unspoken rules.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a crucial lens to understand the fragility of suburban identity. The Richardson family's devotion to their image – of fairness, success, and liberal tolerance – is revealed to be an ongoing, fragile performance. Their conformity masks repressed desires, hypocrisies, and prejudices, a performance that collapses dramatically along with their house, resulting in "little fires everywhere" with "multiple points of origin" and the "possible use of accelerant" (Ng, 2017, p. 7).

Moreover, Ng's portrayal of Shaker Heights mirrors broader cultural critiques of suburban life. As claimed by urbanist Stephen Rowley, the suburb is indeed not only an idyllic place but a "highly loaded cultural signifier" of dysfunction, passive conformity, and hidden transgressions (Rowley, 2015, p. 206). Ng taps into these semiotic connotations, suggesting that the suburb is less a real place than a symbol of a society obsessed with appearances at the expense of truth.

Finally, the recurring motif of 'little fires' throughout the novel functions as both a literal and symbolic representation of systemic tensions. The slow build-up of resentment, repression, and privilege ultimately ignites, making destruction not an accident, but an inevitability rooted deep within the structures of suburban life itself.

Thus, by examining *Little Fires Everywhere* through the intertwined frameworks of Bourdieu's theory of social forces and Butler's theory of performativity, this paper will explain how Ng exposes the fragile performances demanded by suburban life, the invisible structures that sustain privilege, and the slow-burning tensions that ultimately destroy the illusions of safety and success, and the myths of meritocracy and social mobility within the contemporary American suburban culture.

2. Shaker Heights: the quintessential suburb

From its foundation, Shaker Heights embodied the quintessential American suburban ideal[1] – a carefully designed utopia where order, predictability, and perfection were meticulously planned and enforced. As argued by Bourdieu (2020), societies are shaped by the persistent interplay of individuals within structured spaces, where long-term interactions generate a collective *esprit de corps* and social coherence (p. 11). Shaker Heights exemplifies this dynamic: it is a "finite and closed" system engineered to foster stability, predictability, and conformity (Bourdieu, 2021, pp. 8–9; p. 181). In the novel, Ng (2017) describes Shaker Heights as a community steeped in rules, rituals, and expectations, where "everything could and should be planned out" to avoid "the unseemly, the unpleasant, and the disastrous" (p. 12). The town's motto, "[m]ost communities just happen; the best are planned", reflects a belief in the absolute manageability of life – a belief that echoes Bourdieu's notion that social fields, while structured by invisible forces, are designed to produce a maximum of synchronized and orchestrated practices (p. 182).

The suburb's obsession with meticulous planning extended beyond physical design into the regulation of social life, fostering a homogenized community identity rooted in collective ideals of success, safety, and propriety. As Ng (2017) illustrates, Shaker Heights residents maintained strict codes of conduct even for activities as benign as trick-or-treating, with sirens marking the official start and end times (p. 59). This conformity, however, masked deeper social tensions. Historically, American suburbs promised an Arcadian refuge (Knox, 2008, p. 13), yet as historians like Stephanie Coontz (1992) and Paul Knox (2008) note, the suburban dream often concealed domestic violence, consumerist isolation, and existential boredom (Coontz, 1992, p. 35; Knox, 2008, p. 36). Shaker Heights is no exception. Despite its liberal self-image – symbolized by initiatives to

[1] According to Lewis Mumford (1961), the ideal American suburb constituted a sort of "escape" from the city and its drama, a "segregated community" for the elite. Mumford describes these places as sites of conformity: houses barely distinguishable from one another, put at a uniform distance from each other, inhabited by people belonging to the same social class and with the same taste and cultural references (pp. 486–493).

encourage integration after national civil rights upheavals (Ng, 2017, p. 159) – the community's commitment to order and perfection often veiled latent racial and class anxieties.

According to Bourdieu (2020), the field of forces that constitutes any social space is invisible but exerts a profound influence on behavior, molding dispositions that match the demands of the structure (pp. 13, 73). In Shaker Heights, the space itself was selected for those who could internalize its expectations: a "structure of feeling" developed, binding residents to shared symbols of affluence, stability, and control (Knox, 2008, p. 34). The Richardson family, as product of this environment, view their lives through the lens of this suburban ideology, believing themselves paragons of virtue and success. Yet as Ng (2017) subtly reveals, the town's aesthetic perfection – flourishing gardens, orderly neighborhoods, and collective pride in public institutions – only thinly conceals the cracks formed by suppressed desires, hidden inequalities, and repressed difference (pp. 156–157).

Shaker Heights, much like the suburbs described by Lewis Mumford (1961), becomes an "asylum for the preservation of illusion" (p. 494): a place where residents retreat from the complexities and discomforts of reality into a self-sustaining fantasy of stability and moral superiority. Beneath the surface order, Ng shows, lies a volatile tension – an accumulation of small, invisible pressures that, like the titular "little fires", can ignite at multiple points, challenging the community's cherished self-image and exposing the fragility of its ideal. This obsessive commitment to order and perfection did not just shape the town's landscape; it molded its residents, too. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Richardson family, who embody the ideals, contradictions, and blind spots of Shaker Heights itself.

3. The Richardsons: A habitus of privilege

The Richardson family exemplifies the kind of privilege that feels so natural it goes unnoticed, embodying what Bourdieu (2020) describes as *habitus* – a system of deeply ingrained dispositions shaped by social conditions, which operates beneath conscious awareness (pp. 7, 14). Like "fish swimming in water", the Richardsons live within structures they did not create but that seem perfectly suited to them, adapting so seamlessly to their environment that their success appears effortless and self-evident (2020, pp. 14, 66). As residents of Shaker Heights, they have been "fashioned" by their surroundings and move through life with a sense of ease and entitlement that comes from a complete alignment between their socialized selves and the world they inhabit (Ng, 2017, pp. 66, 72).

Bill Richardson, a defense attorney, and his wife Elena, a journalist for the *Sun Press*, reflect this adaptation not only through their professions but through their deep investment in the town's ideals (p. 11). Mrs. Richardson's upbringing – rooted in annual charitable donations and community events – instilled in her

a moral framework centered on "doing good", a framework that masks a more profound, unexamined comfort with the status quo (p. 12). Their adolescent children – Lexie, Trip, Moody, and Izzy – move through their privileged lives with an unconscious confidence: ordering without hesitation, lounging without self-consciousness (p. 36), exhibiting what Bourdieu (2020) would call a "feel for the game", (p. 80) instinctively matching the expectations of their social field without needing to question them. Their cultural capital is not just embodied but also institutionalized, seen in their educational success and social networks – the kind of capital transmitted invisibly through family life, in everyday interactions that pass down not just knowledge but implicit codes of behavior and belonging (Bourdieu 2021, pp. 161–165).

Pearl Warren, an outsider to this world, befriends almost immediately Moody, and she is introduced to the Richardsons' house where she notices the heavy furniture, the framed photographs, the curio cabinets—symbols of a deeply rooted stability and permanence that she finds both alien and alluring (Ng, 2017, p. 37). This immersion in material and cultural wealth produces a kind of inevitability: to live among such abundance is to be anchored, to have no need to question one's place. Yet beneath the surface of this carefully maintained order lies rigidity and an intolerance for disruption. Izzy, the family's radical spirit and eventually the arsonist of her own house, resists the smooth functioning of this system, refusing to dance when instructed, refusing to obey without question (Ng, 2017, pp. 40–41) – revealing what Bourdieu (2021, p. 271) calls the "discipline" of immediate, mechanical obedience that the Richardson household demands.

In their perfectly manicured neighborhood where "every lawn had a tree and the streets curved so that no one went too fast" (Ng, 2017, p. 323), the Richardsons embody the dream of suburban perfection, a dream that demands conformity and suppresses difference. Mrs. Richardson, a "creature of habit", represents the culmination of this social conditioning, maintaining appearances with such consistency that her routines are entirely predictable (p. 322). Their habitus, formed at the intersection of material wealth, cultural privilege, and social sanction, gives the Richardsons their seamless authority in Shaker Heights, while at the same time blinding them to the ways their security and superiority are constructed – and exclusionary (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 124, 202, 225; 2021, p. 195).

Even in moments of confrontation – such as when Mr. Richardson defends a couple of friends struggling in court to obtain the custody of an Asian child whose mother had abandoned and then, regretting her choice, had come back to claim her – the family's reflex is to maintain the boundary that preserves their order rather than question the deeper inequalities it rests upon (Ng, 2017, p. 267). Their world, like the mechanisms Bourdieu (2020) describes, feels perfectly suited to their touch – not because of any inherent superiority, but because both they and their environment have been shaped by the same forces (p. 72).

Thus, the Richardson family's polished existence is less a reflection of innate virtue than a continuous, ritualized performance of the ideals they have inherited, rehearsed, and embodied over time. Their carefully maintained image of familial success – rooted in discipline, order, and propriety – reveals not a static truth about who they are, but an ongoing enactment of social norms that must be constantly reiterated to sustain their appearance of legitimacy. In this way, the Richardsons exemplify how, as Judith Butler argues, identity – whether individual or familial – is not simply *being* but *doing*: a performative repetition of culturally sanctioned scripts that create the illusion of naturalness, as it will be explored in the next section.

4. The performativity of family ideals

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a powerful lens through which to analyze the construction of family identity. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, such ideals of domestic perfection are exposed as carefully repeated performances rather than inherent truths. Butler (1999) asserts that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes"; rather, it is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 33). This concept can be translated into the realm of family ideals and roles, which, in the case of the Richardson family, is not a natural formation but a performance that is both compelled by and complicit in upholding normative ideals. As Butler (1993) writes, these acts are sustained "through reiteration", producing effects by simulating what they repeat (pp. 20, 94). In the Richardson household, these norms are ritualized and internalized, particularly by Elena, who "crafted the pleasant, wholesome stories her editor demanded" while tending to her family with the controlled precision of someone passing "an eternal flame" – a metaphor for domestic virtue made safe through discipline (Ng, 2017, pp. 108, 161).

Such performances are fraught with anxiety, though. Butler (2004) emphasizes that the "viability of our own personhood is fundamentally dependent on social norms", norms that differentiate the human based on "race, morphology, recognizability" (p. 2). Elena's maternal ideal is a response to inherited pressures: her mother had scorned women who stayed home, demanding that Elena "have it all", framing deviation as wasted potential (Ng, 2017, p. 108). This reveals how performativity is not simply an act of will, but a response to being "gone by norms", where the "I" that persists does so only by critically negotiating the forces that shape it (Butler, 2004, p. 3). In this framework, even rebellion – such as Izzy's – becomes legible as resistance to the "compulsory performances" of heteronormative, middle-class femininity, which Butler (1993) argues are "haunted by their own inefficacy" and must be anxiously repeated to assert their legitimacy (p. 257).

The result is a dynamic in which family identity is never secure, but always vulnerable to reinterpretation. Izzy, framed as the disruptive daughter, becomes

the uncontainable element of the family performance: "that child who she thought had been her opposite but who had… inherited that spark her mother had long ago tamped down" (Ng, 2017, p. 336). Her rebellion reveals the theatricality of the entire domestic structure, what Butler (1993) might describe as the moment when "the ideal splits off from its appropriation" and the performance's "artifice" becomes visible (p. 129).

The family ideal, far from being timeless or universal, is historically and culturally constructed. As historians Joseph Hawes and Elizabeth Nybakken (1991) argue, "the history of the American family is a story of the conflict between the 'family ideal' in American society and the core value of individualism" (p. 8). Education and gender studies scholar Edgar Z. Friedenberg (1959) extends this tension into adolescence, which he describes as "a conflict… between the individual and society" (p. 9), where the young person must become "a person in his own right" but only "on the culture's terms" (p. 12). This paradox – of needing to differentiate oneself through conformity – is precisely the terrain of performativity, which Butler (1993) insists is "neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation" but rather a constrained, reiterative process shaped by discourse, exclusion, and anxiety (p. 95; Butler, 2004, p. 1). The arrival of Mia and Pearl functions as a disruption of this cycle: they neither obey nor reinforce the same norms. Their presence forces the Richardsons to confront the limits and contradictions of their idealized roles, and ultimately, the performative nature of the "American family" itself.

5. Mia and Pearl: challenging the status quo

The arrival of Mia Warren and her daughter Pearl disrupts the seemingly flawless social order of Shaker Heights, where appearances are paramount and deviation from the norm is subtly, yet powerfully, discouraged. The two are a blatant deviation to the norm: as it is discovered later in the novel, not only is Mia a single mother, but Pearl is the product of an agreement between her and a wealthy couple, the Ryans, who paid her to carry a child and relinquish it to them. Mia had eventually decided to keep the child to herself, lying about the fate of the child and telling the Ryans she had miscarried. Moreover, the nomadic existence of Mia and Pearl is in obvious contrast with the suburban logic of Shaker Heights. As Bourdieu (2020) explains, "the incorporated structures of the habitus generate practices that can adapt to the objective structures of the social world without being the product of an explicit intention to adapt" (p. 64) a dynamic that defines the Richardsons' way of life. Their "habitus of necessity" (p. 125) fosters compliance and order, but also passively resists change. Mia and Pearl bring with them a different kind of habitus – one shaped by artistic exploration, economic precarity, and social marginality. As Bourdieu (2020) puts it, "when you don't have the right habitus for your object, you fail" (p. 31) and in the rigid field of Shaker Heights, Mia and

Pearl are initially misfits, threatening the illusion – the shared belief in the rules of the game – that binds the town together (p. 84).

Mia, described as "a woman who took an almost perverse pleasure in flouting the normal order" (Ng, 2017, p. 138), unsettles the values that define the community. While Mrs. Richardson dismisses her as "some kind of artist" (p. 11), her art – though once sold for only a few dollars (p. 27) – eventually supports the survival of herself and her child and becomes a mode of resistance. Her daughter Pearl, "a quiet fifteen-year-old with a long dark braid" (p. 8), internalizes this ethos of transience and resilience, her awareness of money and instability (p. 98) shaping her sensitivity and curiosity. In contrast to the Richardsons' polished suburban lifestyle, Pearl remarks, she and her mother "never had a house of [their] own before" (p. 19), a reminder of the invisible instability behind her calm demeanor.

Bourdieu (2020, p. 74) notes that "people who import unorthodox and discordant dispositions into a soft position have a good chance of being able to mould the position to suit their dispositions", and this dynamic plays out as Mia and Pearl begin to exert influence in their new environment. For Mia, who once faced skepticism from her own lower-middle-class parents – her mother calling her photographs "a waste of money" (p. 190) and her parents who had "practicality… baked into their bones" (p. 197) –art becomes a form of survival and subversion. Bourdieu (2021, p. 170) emphasizes that incorporated capital functions as a sort of nature, and in Mia's case, her artistry becomes her essence, her way of being in the world. Unlike the Richardsons, whose cultural capital is validated through institutional pathways, Mia's is intensely personal, unrecognized by the dominant social order but no less powerful.

The class distinction between the two families becomes particularly stark in moments like that in which Pearl compares the Richardsons' kitchen and the way their children are dressed with her modest life on Winslow Road, filled with salvaged furniture and shared spaces (p. 97). Moody's shock at their living conditions – "he tried to imagine sharing a room… could people really be so poor?" (p. 19) –demonstrates how deeply ingrained these differences are. Bourdieu (2021, p. 128) explains how "social agents placed in a given social situation will tend to adapt their aspirations…to the possibilities objectively written into these conditions", yet both Mia and Pearl challenge this determinism. Their creative aspirations reject the logic of institutional validation – what Bourdieu (p. 241) calls "institutionalized capital", like educational qualifications – and instead insist on worth that is lived, not conferred.

For Mia, art is inseparable from identity. As Bourdieu (2021, pp. 166–167) notes, "culture… is coextensive with its bearer", and this makes artists particularly vulnerable. Even her decision to keep Pearl can be seen as a resistance to commodifying her body – "her womb was not an apartment for rent" (p. 215) – and her eventual assertion of her own motherhood against legal and economic claims

(p. 186) reflect her refusal to detach identity from action. Even her discovery of photography at age eleven (p. 188) was a reclamation of self in a world that dismissed such pursuits. For the Richardsons, who "lacked for nothing but were never spoiled" (p. 195), her choices are unfathomable. Their world is defined by rules – about property, appearances, and social order – while Mia and Pearl inhabit a more precarious but flexible space.

Ultimately, as Bourdieu (2021, p. 75) writes, "the person who manages to displace the position shakes up the whole space", and this is precisely what Mia and Pearl do. Their presence calls into question the illusion of neutrality in the norms of Shaker Heights. While the Richardsons believe they've earned their place through merit and discipline, Mia and Pearl reveal how much of that security is the result of inherited privilege and unacknowledged exclusions. In choosing to live differently, Mia and Pearl force Shaker Heights – and the reader – to confront the limits of conformity, the costs of comfort, and the quiet power of dissent.

6. Conclusion

The novel opens with the fire that destroys the house of the Richardsons, which could be read as a metaphor of the disintegration of seemingly stable social structures when they are confronted with lives and values that refuse to conform. This plot choice reveals how privilege and habitus shape not only opportunity but the very sense of what is imaginable or permissible. As Bourdieu (2021, p. 6) observes, "there are within each one of us potentials that will never materialize because they will never find the social conditions of their implementation – that is, a field in which they could be implemented". For Mia and Pearl, and for others who exist outside the dominant structures of power in Shaker Heights, these fields are narrow or entirely absent. Their potential, creativity, and independence challenge the fixed norms that preserve social inequality under the guise of order and meritocracy.

At the heart of the novel lies a critique of the suburban consumer logic that defines worth through ownership, stability, and appearances – what Jean Baudrillard (1998, p. 65) identifies as a culture where "society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to destroy them". This consumption extends not just to material goods but to people, relationships, and even ideals. The Richardson family's identity is maintained by curating a particular image of success and goodness, which in turn relies on the erasure or containment of that which threatens it – Mia, and even Izzy. Like the objects Baudrillard describes, the value the Richardsons place on their way of life is intensified through its eventual unraveling. A complementary plot choice had already been operated in another novel about the suburbs and its discontents published in 1999: *Music for Torching* by A. M. Homes. Paul and Elaine, another unhappy and bored suburban couple,

burned their house down on a whim at the beginning of the novel. Thus it is inevitable to apply Baudrillard's concept also to this other novel and claim that, when it comes to the American suburbs and their families, the social and familial order must be scorched before it can be reimagined.

In this sense, Ng's novel is not simply a story of loss but of radical possibility. "Sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over", Mia tells Izzy, "[a]fter the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow. People are like that, too" (Ng, 2017, p. 324). This echoes Bourdieu's (2020) argument that positions and habitus are not immutable – when disrupted, they can shake "the whole space" (p. 75). In the ashes of the Richardson home and their illusion of control, a new awareness begins to take root – not just in Izzy, who flees after the arson of her house and decides to reinvent herself, but in those left behind to confront what was lost and why.

Little Fires Everywhere leaves readers with more than a critique – it offers a call to action. It challenges them to examine the conditions that suppress individual potential and to recognize the social scripts they unconsciously follow. It suggests that what may appear as rebellion, instability, or failure might actually be the necessary destruction through which more equitable ways of being can emerge. Only by acknowledging the structures that limit them – and sometimes setting them on fire – can they begin to imagine a more inclusive and just society.

References

Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society: Myth and structures*. Sage.
Bourdieu, P. (2020). *Habitus and field*. Polity Press.
Bourdieu, P. (2021). *Forms of capital*. Polity Press.
Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.
Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. Basic Books.
Friedenberg, E. Z. (1959). *The vanishing adolescent*. Beacon Press.
Hawes, J. M., & Nybakken, E. I. (1991). *American families: A research guide and historical handbook*. Greenwood Press.
Homes, A. M. (1999). *Music for Torching.* Scribner.
Knox, P. (2008). *Metroburbia USA*. Rutgers University Press.
Mumford, L. (1961). *The city in history: Its origins, its transformations, and its prospects*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
Ng, C. (2017). *Little fires everywhere*. Penguin Books.
Rowley, S. (2015). *Movie towns and sit-com suburbs: Building Hollywood's ideal communities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Vermeulen, T. (2014). *Scenes from the suburbs: The suburb in contemporary U.S. film and television*. Edinburgh University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Eleni Ermioni Tasioula, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.65-77

Narrating Queer Identity in Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming*

ABSTRACT
The following study introduces an exploration of queer narrative identity as depicted in selected characters in recently popularized Caribbean American fiction. A close examination of Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* allows for an analysis of the challenges faced and the contested spaces traversed by queer literary characters, within a transcultural context, subsequently foregrounding a nuanced understanding of queer identity and relations of power. Through a selective reading of Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* the literary representation of queer identity is placed under an intersectional lens and examined against a backdrop of postcolonial US Caribbean communities in New York. Stereotypical representations of Latin machismo, intergenerational conflict, intense familial relationships and a closeted behavioral model regarding queerness are some of the main factors that emphasize immigrant vulnerability and affect identity negotiation.

KEYWORDS
Latin American studies; transculturality; narrative identity

1. Queer identity in contemporary Caribbean American fiction

The LGBTIQ+ community has long been enmeshed in contexts of severe marginalization, historical misrepresentation, physical and psychological vulnerability. Within today's whirlwind of literary production, LGBTQ+ portrayals seem to have found fertile ground to illuminate the nuanced experiences of queer identity and to encroach the previously selective silence that encumbered queer discourse. The following study introduces an exploration of queer narrative identity and a struggle of identity negotiation set against a backdrop of patriarchal stereotypical notions embedded in US Caribbean communities. A close examination of male queer literary characters of Latin American origin brings forth a nuanced understanding of queer identity in relation to power exchanges, patriarchal modes of oppression, performativity and certain fantasies

Eleni Ermioni Tasioula, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης, Τμήμα Αγγλικής Γλώσσας και Φιλολογίας, Πανεπιστημιούπολη Α.Π.Θ, Εθνικής Αμύνης 41, 546 35 Θεσσαλονίκη, elinatas6@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0040-8649

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

of an American "good life"[1]. The main fictional characters discussed are the female protagonist, the protagonist's queer brother and their relational others. His closeted sexual identity appears to gradually hinder and affect several aspects of the character's personal, social and political life. My analysis, thus, revolves primarily around a queer Latin man's character, in recently popularized, female-authored Latin American fiction. Character analysis in this paper is purposefully conducted in a manner that highlights within-group tensions in contemporary Caribbean American communities. Through a selective reading of Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* the literary representation of queer identity is placed under an intersectional lens and examined against the backdrop of tensions within US Caribbean postcolonial communities in twenty-first century New York. Persisting stereotypical representations of Latin machismo, intergenerational conflict, familial relationships and a closeted behavioral model regarding queerness are some of the main factors that emphasize immigrant vulnerability and affect identity negotiation.

2. The Caribbean imaginary, colonial legacy and sexuality

The intersecting influences of colonial histories, racial visions, sexuality, and identity formation has long been a crucial and recurring theme in the Caribbean imaginary. In order to fully grasp the Caribbean region's complexity and fraught histories it is important to understand how colonial ideals and mindsets, transferred and imposed upon the colonized, continue to shape and affect identity formation in contemporary contexts.

Roderick Ferguson in his book on sexual difference in America, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004), offers a framework that explores the intertwining relationship between colonialism and sexuality. In diaspora communities, this entanglement points to legacies of colonialism which perpetuate racial standards whilst linking racialized visions to heteronormative standards, imposed upon the colonized by Western traditions. Ferguson contends that colonial regimes imposed harsh sexual norms on colonized peoples. When looking at queerness in the Caribbean diaspora, I argue that colonial histories and rigid heteronormative ideas continue to inform subjects in communities, creating unresolved within-group tensions. Ferguson's framework highlights that within Caribbean communities being queer is considered an "aberration", a sort of deviant behavior. This fact suggests that residual colonial mindsets which view heterosexuality as racialized, gendered, and tied to colonial constructions

[1] In Lauren Berlant's seminal work, *Cruel Optimism (2011)* the concept of the "good life" offers an important interpretation of how aspirations and neo-capitalist impressions of a fulfilled life affect and hinder individuals' well-being and social lives.

of "civilization" continue to exist in Caribbean's postcolonial landscapes. Hence, as Gonzalez's narrative suggests, queerness often remains hidden or suppressed.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) expands the understanding of queerness by addressing the epistemological structures that form how sexuality is understood, viewed and performed. Sedgwick examines the binaries of "out" and "closeted". She argues that the closet is not merely a spatial or temporal condition but a sort of a central mechanism through which sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is constructed and regulated. Transporting this thought in a Caribbean context, this theory proves to be particularly pertinent. Even in postcolonial contexts heteronormativity is deeply embedded in Caribbean societies and continues to perpetuate the closet as a defining feature of queer identity. Through an examination of male Caribbean American hidden sexuality I will proceed to further explore how the concept of the "closeted" and not sexually liberated man hinders multiple aspects of his life and severely affects his well-being. As Gonzalez's narrative evolves it is emphasized that queerness is often obscured, both publicly and privately, due to colonial stereotypes, patriarchal oppression and societal repression.

The concept of hidden queerness is crucial for understanding how queer Caribbean individuals, especially male ones in this narrative, internalize their non-normative sexual identities when repressed. Drawing on the work of MacAdams, I explore how individuals construct meaning and try to make sense of their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. In the case of queer Caribbean identity, the narrative is often painted with denial, ambivalence, fragmented storytelling and distortion of linear spatio-temporal structure. The central character tries to negotiate his sexuality with tumultuous and non-accepting environments. The trauma of the closet and the ongoing cultural repression of queerness, shapes how the individual develops a sense of self, often through fragmented or repressed narratives.

A critical examination of Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" is significantly tied to the context of traumatized subjectivities in the novel. Berlant (2011) contends that "cruel optimism" refers to the attachment to unattainable or harmful objects of desire – goals that, even though they are ultimately unattainable, continue to shape the way people invest in certain individualistic aims.

This concept aligns with the experiences of individuals who face repression or confinement in US contexts. The pursuit of an authentic, flourishing identity through a pursuit of upward mobility, goods, or social recognition may often lead to disillusionment and hinder self-growth. In the novel, the male main character embodies the struggle of "cruel optimism", as he chases the elusive dream of individual flourishing, social acceptance and ascension in the political sphere yet the more he keeps his sexual identity covert the more he is traumatized and confined. The character's development evolves from a position in the closet

to a position of agency, imbued with acceptance and courage. However, in the process of disclosing his authentic self to his relational others, personal liberation at times leads to unattainable goals, ultimately resulting in the reinforcement of an identity caught in-between the closet and a striving for fulfillment.

The aforementioned theoretical frameworks of Ferguson (2004), Sedgwick (1990), MacAdams (2018), and Berlant (2011), inform my exploration of Gonzalez's novel with regard to navigation and expressing queer identity within a Caribbean American diasporic context. This paper will delve into how queer individuals in the US Caribbean, through a journey from repression to personal agency are able to address their past traumatic memories and reach toward self-fulfilling and authentic personal development.

3. Narrative development and queer identity

The novel offers a conjunction of different facets of the immigrant lived experience. It simultaneously addresses Puerto-Ricanness in New York, gentrification, remnants of colonialism, machismo, relationality, and queerness. Gonzalez employs a third person narrator and shifts narrative points of view. Linear narration is often intercepted by shorter or lengthier flashback narrations. A non-linear structure – marked by interjecting flashbacks – disrupts a traditional, linear progression of storytelling. This narrative mode creates spacio-temporal fluidity, where the past and present are in constant dialogue and the reader is transposed to a fragmented sequence of spatial and temporal grounds. The narration goes back and forth between chronological time and subjective time, allowing for a deeper exploration of characters' experiences, struggle with past trauma and fluctuating internal states. This narrative technique evokes a sense of fragmentation or even disorientation, which mirrors the psychological complexity of the characters; who in this particular case grapple with external critical conditions of their surroundings that deeply affect their inner psychological state.

The narrative focuses greatly on Olga Acevedo, the female protagonist, yet for the purpose of this study my focus shifts to Prieto Acevedo, Olga's brother and prominent character in the novel. Prieto is portrayed as a benevolent Brooklyn congressman who tries to do justice to his home country, Puerto Rico, all while being a closeted gay man. Through flashback narrations of his life's trajectory, it appears that the character grapples with stereotypical representations of machismo, believing his queerness to be unaccepted by his immigrant family and community. Caribbean diasporic communities, according to Ferguson's critique in Aberrations in Black (2004), maintain residual Western stereotypes of patriarchy and heteronormativity, many of which were imposed by European colonisers to the colonized Caribbean people. According to such by-products of colonialism, being heterosexual, and especially a womanizer in the case of men, coincides with colonial constructions of "civilization" and links heterosexuality

to dominance, power and authority in the public sphere. Prieto initially presents himself as a family man and politician while keeping his gay identity a secret. Being a Democrat in the borough of Brooklyn, Prieto struggles to uphold his appointed status as the "Latino Obama" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 144), an identity marker by which he is essentially conditioned. From early on in the novel, when the narrative point of view first changes from Olga's to Prieto's story, it is notable that Prieto as a newly elected congressman wanted the people of South Brooklyn to "feel good for voting him" and strived to carry the political "mantle" from the immigrant generation before him (p. 35). However, as he stressfully maintains two households in the present moment the narrative foreshadows his living a double life, one as a heterosexual young politician and one as a closeted queer man. The transposition of narrative between past and present time underscores a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty, as the reader gets a grasp of the male character's pressure to balance two different identities. Moreover, flashback narration and disruption of linearity allow for a thematic exploration of memory, trauma, and identity formation, reflecting Prieto's ambivalence and shame as he presumes that his queerness would never be accepted by his relational others. Revealing his authentic self would result in losing ground with his Caribbean community, his family and his Caribbean American voters.

Queerness and its representation in popular culture has been affected by colonial histories, constraints on sexual identity and social exclusion. In Latin American fiction, due to religious beliefs and Catholic influences queer identity has been downplayed or inexplicitly mentioned. During the Latin American literary boom (1960s–1970s), which was predominated by authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes, queerness was at times present in narrative but not explicitly acknowledged, often reflected in "forbidden" sexual desire or fluid sexual identity which remained unaddressed. In the past few decades, however, Latin American fiction, film and television have progressed to embrace more overt representations of queerness. This is followed by works produced by the Afro-Latinx community which represent the struggles of queer people of color alongside racial stereotypes, colonial legacies and within-group communal tensions. Some Afro-Latinx works are "Mujer Negra" by Luz Méndez, "Queer and Black in Latin America" by José Esteban Muñoz (1999) and Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004).

As queer theorists have observed, "queer" serves as an umbrella term for diverse sexual groups that do not fit into heterosexual or cisgender categories (Shah, 2023). These groups that divert from heteronormative representations tend to be minoritized socially. Nevertheless, theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Lauren Berlant (2011), Judith Butler (2006) and Roderick Ferguson (2004), offer a thorough examination of the social construction of sexual identities and behaviors in gay and lesbian studies. Judith Butler's work has been

highly influential in Caribbean queer theory. Her writings particularly in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* has opened up a pathway for Caribbean scholars to challenge normative ideas about gender and sexuality. Her critique on performativity has been integrated in discussions on how Caribbean identities are performed within colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts. Ferguson (2004), in specific, moves on to examine how racial identity, queerness, and colonial histories intersect. Ferguson (2004) suggests the concept of a "queer of color critique", which primarily focuses on how queer people of color navigate their lives under the remnants of colonial legacies, especially underscoring the remaining colonial impact of a Western heteronormative mindset enforced upon the colonized (pp. 3–6). In Gonzalez's novel, male queer characters occupy a liminal position within Caribbean communities. The protagonist struggles with external heteronormative gender ideas, many of which align with stereotypes of Latin machismo and being a "womanizer". Ferguson argues that colonialism did not only enforce racial hierarchies but also sexual ones, through mindsets and agendas against homosexuality. As the narrative takes place in 21st century Brooklyn and Puerto Rico it can be suggested that colonial ideas regarding heteronormativity are residual and still impactful.

Sedgwick underscores that the term "queer" can mean something *different*. Such difference lies in the fact that the term may refer to an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made . . . to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 7). The term emerges as a polysemous rather than a monolithic one. According to Sedgwick (1994), queer opens up to outward "dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all" and relate to other identity-constituting factors. The insofar fraught term "queer" "deepens and shifts" and extends to encompass further dimensions of diversity (p. 8). Drawing from Sedgwick's conceptualization, I argue that the term and its constituents suggest a spectrum outlook, revealing queer not as a static categorization but as a more fluid iteration; a spectrum that we can understand as inclusive and expansive. In the novel, Prieto's diversity – which includes non-heteronormative aspects of his personality – is something which he hesitates to embrace. His political and social status enmesh and interfere with his personal one. The congressman keeps his queerness covert from all his family, even from his sister Olga with whom he shares a deeper bond, and from his immigrant community which he represents and stands for in the political field. Although Prieto holds a certain level of privilege, the way his narrative evolves, be it from his or third parties' perspective, suggests an analysis from an intersectional perspective.

Kimberle Crenshaw in her seminal work "Mapping the Margins" (1991) introduces intersectionality as an approach which attends to the overlapping categories of race and gender and how they affect identity construction, often

leading to marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Crenshaw's intersectionality attends to within-group tensions and intragroup differences. Her concept has expanded over the years and currently encompasses multiple intersecting categories. Olena Hankivsky (2014) has expanded on the term, underscoring that intersectionality "promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations", such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, migration status and others, and that these interactions "occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power" (p. 2). Different social locations interact and interplay with queerness in Prieto's narrative, leading to a complicated positioning and identity development. The novel's closeted politician and family man has created a personal myth around his name and societal status while keeping aspects of his personality hidden. For him lying has evolved into "a survival tactic he mastered" accompanied by a "sense of shame", guilt and cowardice (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 89–91). Prieto is a man of color from a Puerto Rican diasporic background who has lived through the struggles of his working class family and has had stereotypes of machismo imprinted on him. As a colored man in NYC trying to make political difference for his home country and not wishing to displease his family nor his Puerto Rican community, Prieto believes that his queerness would be associated with a social, political and personal stigma. Labeled as the "Latino Obama" and employing a "linguistic mezcla" in his public speaking Prieto manages through his narrative process to stir attention to "all facets of himself at once" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 144). He accommodates everyone's needs and expectations, but purposefully hides his sexuality from the public. Halfway through the novel at a high-end charity event he gracefully makes conversation with the wealthy crowd of Manhattan. Prieto casually resolves to code-switching alternating between Spanish, Spanish slang and English in order to address his predicted voters, be they Puerto Rican, Afro Latin, or Upper East Siders. Nonetheless, through distinct narrative slips it becomes evident that Prieto has never outwardly disclosed his real private life or sexuality. Narrative slips include mentions that "no man can be all things at once" (p. 144) Olga's admittance that she "long suspected that Prieto was gay" and he would rather die than "embrace an identity so 'alternative'" (p. 111). Olga's narrated thoughts offer missing and invaluable fractals of her brother's identity construction. The latter suggests a negation of any "alternative" status that deviates from heterosexual norms and progressively spirals into a self-circumscribed lived experience that hints at an experience of oppression.

Residual stereotypes of machismo are voiced in the novel through intercepting narrative flashbacks. The family's mother, a political activist who is portrayed as an imposing but physically absent figure, intervenes in the narrative through letters she sends to her children from afar. The italicized letters range from 1990 to the narrative present of 2017 and chronicle Olga and Prieto's mother's prescriptions

on how to live their lives. Among the mother's pressures on Prieto's maintaining an activist political stand in favor of Puerto Rico, it is mentioned that "as a young bachelor . . . un muchacho tan guapo como tu" it would be best that he "take a wife" (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 85–86). Indirectly, the mother dictates that her son become a revolutionary, "manly" leading figure with a strong woman by his side to further aid his personal and political cause, leaving no room for diversions. The mother's rigid and prescriptive voice has a strong impact on Prieto's identity formation through the years and prompts his closeted behavior. The son has in essence constructed his externally perceived identity and his heterosexual façade in a continuous attempt to earn his mother's acceptance and approval. This stance is further instilled by his family's heteronormative expectations that being a Latino man coincides with being strictly heterosexual. Feelings of confusion and pressure envelope the son, whose storytelling demonstrates a degree of vulnerability.

4. Vulnerability and the narrative of the "good life"

Prieto's silenced personal account when Olga narrates illuminates a level of vulnerability and a possibility for social exclusion and personal confinement. From an intersectionality perspective, inequities result from multiple intersecting factors that condition one's lived experience (Hankivsky, 2014). Placing an intersectional lens on Prieto's personal narrative and Olga's narration of Prieto reveals underlying power relations. These relations are unveiled in the sphere of the personal, the domestic and the social. The multiple, intersecting social locations in Prieto's life condition him to live a fabricated, closeted life, one that disempowers his personhood and proposes a fabricated semblance of an American narrative of the "good life". Lauren Berlant (2011) explains the good life as a fantasy "by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'" (p. 2). This might include reciprocity in couples, a happy family life, upward mobility and professional goals. The fantasy is subsequently linked to the self-coined term "cruel optimism", a relation that occurs when objects of desire or optimism serve as an "obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Relations "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). According to philosophy theorist Ruti (2018), Berlant's cruel optimism names "the gist of the American dream: the hope that hard work - effort, striving, diligence, and doggedness - will be rewarded" (p. xxxvi). American fantasies of a better future often generate negative feelings in the individual and deter one's development. They are also greatly based on individuation. In Berlant's theorization, individuation is intertwined with what the American way of life and society deem as a successful personal development. This relies heavily on notions of individualism, personal flourishing, upward mobility and the accumulation of goods, approximating the American Dream fantasy. Maintaining a way of life that is based on individuation

entails a constant striving for personal success which simultaneously hinders self-growth. That is how optimistic life goals lead to "cruelty" in Berlant's concept, suggesting that the pursuit of such individualistic ideals actually hinders personal flourishing.

Prieto experiences "cruelty" since he has seemingly reached the American "good life" prototype, by being elected as congressman, having formed a family and ascended socially. He has outwardly established an identity as a respected politician with an activistic scope, a valued family member and a beloved father. His objects of desire and optimistic goals seem to have been attained. Yet he remains discontent, confined and oppressed. In the novel, character's goals and achievements are tied to optimistic relations which are based, however, on ideals of individual fulfillment, social ascension, and ultimately linked with "cruelty". On an external, sociopolitical level the character falls victim to the "complex issue of systemic oppression" since if he is outed as a Latino gay man he will lose the support of the "macho Hispanic community" and wind up politically disempowered (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 95–96). Conversely, if not elected, he will not be able to assist in the prosperity of his community. On a personal level, having "his most private life becoming public paralyzed him with fear", dreading his family's rejection (pp. 95–96). The character experiences perplexity and ambivalence, causal feelings of "cruel", optimistic relations that impede his identity evolution. The "good life" fantasy that the character has been striving for most of his life is a fabricated and nebulous one; additionally, it functions as a major deterrence to his self-growth and well-being.

5. Sustained notions of Queerness and narrative identity

Prieto's personal account of an internalized life story constitutes his narrative identity; an identity impacted by his hidden queerness and social pretense resulting in a deeply conflicted construction contoured with ambivalence about his future. From a psychological standpoint, McAdams (2008) underlines that within the cluster of personal narratives and life stories narrative identity refers to "an individual's internalized, evolving and integrative story of the self" (p. 7). It involves the integration of "the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Within this realm, "personality shows its most important and intricate relations to culture and society" mindfully proposing that "the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity" (McAdams, 2008, pp. 242–243). As personal storytelling develops it becomes evident that Prieto's communal surroundings (that of his Puerto Rican peers and family and his Brooklyn constituents) shape important aspects of his character development. His political life, social standing and personal life are affected by a lack of mothering and the confinements of a sexuality kept hidden from his family and peers.

The character's storytelling is infused with conflicting emotions, traumatic memories from a motherless past and a lack of acceptance from his relational others. His outward facade is antithetic to his true personality, something which consequently generates an inner struggle. It can also be deduced that all the basic aspects of his life are externally regulated (by his family and his intimate surroundings) and construed in heteronormative terms. Prieto is labeled as the "king of the Castle" in family spaces. The reference constitutes a chapter title and a prominent excerpt in the novel. It emphasizes the family's view of Prieto as a heterosexual man, a valued figure and a leader. It also encloses a hint of irony. The Puerto Rican family stereotypically identifies him in heteronormative terms. Yet that occurs due to Prieto's own facade and silence. In the *Epistemology of the Closet* Sedgwick (1990) underscores the performative aspects of texts with regard to themes of sexuality adding that "closetedness itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (p. 3). Followingly, the fact that "silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge" (p. 4). Silence and ignorance acquire potency in the narrative and fuel an endless cycle of pretense. Prieto behaves "like a robot playing the part of himself" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 112). Retrospectively his "identity was completely enmeshed with the appearance of perfection" and despite that "people weren't outwardly homophobic the description of the perfect Latino man did not include the word 'gay'". Prieto's "need to be liked was compounded by his palpable fear of disappointing people: their family, their mother, his constituents" (p. 112). Feelings of fear, therefore, endorse his secretive attitude. When the "king returned to his castle" - a metaphor, meaning that he came home to his peers - he made "everyone feel special" and "seduce[d] attention from a crowd" (p. 112). The use of the metaphor implies a valued status that is anchored on appraisal, responsibility and the expectations of others. The brother's inclination to please and serve reveals that his notion of belonging is heavily dependent on acceptance by his relational others. Acceptance and access are causally related in this context. Losing both would result in a crisis of identity, which the character purposefully evades.

6. Agency and constraints: beyond silence

The narrative gradually reveals that suppression and hiding of sexuality foreclose any chances of identity evolution and personal growth. In order to achieve higher levels of personal well-being and self-development, individuals need to acquire agency, something which in the case studied surfaces through storytelling. Acceptance from others constitutes a vital element of the character's identity development. What emerges as equally crucial, however, is Prieto's self-acceptance. From a pragmatic standpoint, a revelation of his queerness to

the public might oscillate his political standing resulting in him losing caliber in the political terrain. A strong and stable political position is needed in order for him to exert influence in Puerto Rico's affairs. Openness regarding sexuality may cause a scandal which would subsequently lead to deprivation of power. Sedgwick (1994) argues that ignorance or pretense of ignorance can potentially generate complexity with regard to instances of political struggle. Reification of ignorance appears corollary to danger and might be labeled as a "force" placed "in a demonized space on a never quite explicit ethical schema" (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 124). The convoluted spheres, of the individual's most private, personal sphere and the sphere of the political, open up to an iteration of the stance that "the personal is political". As Berlant (2019) emphasizes in *Reading Sedgwick* "contemporary state not only enjoys but explicitly promotes discrimination", proportionately dismantling civil rights (p. 4).

Reflections in the novel correspond to pertinent and sustained suppression of non-heteronormative individuals. Feigned ignorance, patriarchal claims and insidious political threats regarding the revelation of Prieto's sexuality devolve into a life narrative of vulnerability, in which Prieto is labeled "the local hero, the straight man" and "the compromised, closeted homosexual" and progressively loses more of his agency (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 96). To acquire agency and self-assertion the character needs to resolve to an open declaration of his true sexuality through a confessional narrative. Prieto, from his narrative point of view, remembers "the nights when he was allowed to be completely whole, nights before anyone knew who he was" (p. 98). His former anonymity had provided him with a sense of wholeness and he presently recognizes that he harbors a need to be relieved of the multiple burdens he carries, including his responsibility towards others, his own self shaming and his search for approval. Having confronted his mother after years of absence, he is left to grapple with his authentic self. Prieto offers flashback reflections of his life within the years when speaking to his young daughter and forms a confessional narrative filled with conflicting emotions and a state of fragility. He admits to always wanting to fit in and being afraid of being ridiculed if his true identity was exposed. Finally, in a brave attempt to overcome his self-confinement and shame he openly articulates his queerness to his daughter and the public sphere of Brooklyn's Sunset Park.

Prieto's storytelling gradually evolves from one of concealment, shame and silence to one imbued with an explicit sexual orientation, courage, and a total re-signification of his identity. His narrative transforms from one that devolves in silence and struggle to a narrative of reconstruction and acceptance. The character manages to reconstitute his identity by forming a storied account of his life that, eventually, integrates aspects of himself which were formerly hidden, denied and harmful to his psychological state. While documenting his life story, he grapples with what McAdams refers to as "a conflict between . . . agency and communion"

(McAdams, 2006, p. 244). Agency refers to "the tendency to expand, defend, or express the self" and "communion refers to joining the self with others in bonds of love, friendship, and community" (p. 244). McAdams underscores "the difficulty narrators express in simultaneously fulfilling their strong needs for both personal agency (power) and communion (love)" (p. 244). The acceptance Prieto receives from his daughter fuels his self-determination and assertion to publicly come out to his community. Prieto declares in an open speech directed to his Brooklyn community that he is a gay man who has struggled to hide his true identity and silence that part of himself out of fear (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 106–109). He poignantly underlines that multiple American voices were silenced over the years and more so of the city's working class people of color. After having secured a truthful relationship with his daughter on an intimate level, who seems to wholeheartedly accept him (p. 105), he proceeds to regain his agency in the public terrain, as he faces his fellow Puerto Ricans, and Brooklynites (pp. 107–110).

Prieto could no longer address issues of the queer Latinx community and his constituents from his place in the closet. The novel's character situates himself among the silenced and oppressed groups of the immigrant American context and through the process of storytelling manages to outwardly expose intimate aspects of his identity that go beyond heteronormative terms. His commentary provides insight on persisting inequities that revolve around the intersections of race, ethnicity and class in the contemporary American cultural milieu. The character's storytelling is evolving into one that is imbued with higher levels of sincerity, self-development and emotional growth since by the end of the novel he narrates from a position of truthfulness and acceptance.

7. Concluding remarks

The novel sheds light to the multiple, conflicting aspects that are associated with queerness and immigrant lived experience within a contemporary metropolitan US context. Representations of the LGBTQ+ community are linked to complexity, vulnerability, identity formation and struggle with external recognition and acceptance. Instances of a lack of representation, misrepresentation, and closeted behaviors regarding sexuality are unearthed through a process of personal storytelling in Gonzalez's novel. Personal storytelling is emphasized as a major process for the development of the self and is linked to a larger cultural space which holds expectations from the individual. Storied accounts of the self, set in realistic and contemporary temporal and spatial contexts, highlight persisting heteronormative claims that associate queerness with vulnerability, shame, fear and impossible expectations. These occasions stir up a necessity for engaging with the affective consequences of social exclusion, stigmatization, confusion and non-belonging. The writer portrays themes of hidden queerness correlated with fear of exclusion,

familial and social rejection while touching upon the overarching matter of the coming out story and the liberating dimensions it opens up to. Narrative, therefore, serves as a significant resource in the sociocultural terrain, by unearthing the complex relation of queer immigrant experience to power and the looming consequences of coming out in the sphere of the political. The novel gives voice to non-heteronormative identities that claim their place in a Latin American context and simultaneously grapple with making better sense of their lives. The exploration of the queer Latin American protagonist's tumultuous life story provides insight on current LGBTQ+ representations in US popularized fiction and reaches beyond the enclave of purely dichotomous structures.

References

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (Ed.). (2019). *Reading Sedgwick*. Duke University Press.

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Ferguson, R. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.* University of Minnesota Press.

Gil, M. (2015). Roland Barthes: Life as a text. *Barthes Studies, 1*, 35–60.

Gonzalez, X. (2023). *Olga dies dreaming*. Flatiron Books.

Hankivsky, O. (2014). *Intersectionality 101*. The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, Simon Fraser University.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100–122. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100

McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. Oxford University Press.

McAdams, D. P. (2008). Personal narratives and the life story. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 241–261). Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22*(3), 233–238. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622

Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. University of Minnesota Press.

Ruti, M. (2018). *Penis envy and other bad feelings: The emotional costs of everyday life*. Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1994). *Tendencies*. Taylor & Francis.

Shah, V. (2023). *Queer voices, stories, and representation in modern English literature*. Maharaja Surajmal Brij University.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Leonor María Martínez Serrano, University of Córdoba, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.78-90

Harry Thurston's *Ova Aves*: Exposure to the Animal *Other* in the Anthropocene

ABSTRACT
This article offers an ecocritical reading of the collection *Ova Aves* (2011), co-authored by award-winning Canadian poet-naturalist Harry Thurston and prestigious photographer Thaddeus Holownia. The book gathers thirteen poem-photograph pairings that constitute a moving meditation on the animal other as it manifests in bird eggs originally kept at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick, curated by ornithologist Gay Hansen. By drawing readers' attention to the uniqueness and fragility of eggs, *Ova Aves* is a timely reminder of the need for humankind to rethink how we relate to the nonhuman in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS
ecopoetry; birds; Anthropocene; species extinction; animal other

1. Introduction

As attested by abundant research in the burgeoning field of Animal Studies, a significant body of recent ecopoetry or Anthropocene lyric (Bristow, 2015; Bryson, 2002; Gilcrest, 2002) probes how humans relate to nonhuman animals. Such attention comes as no surprise, as the alarming decimation of animal species precipitated by anthropogenic action is a genuine cause for concern. Ecopoetry is a form of social activism, as it is "nature poetry that has designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world" (Shoptaw, 2016). In this regard, ecopoets see it as their mission to attend to "the more-than-human world" (Abram, 1996, 2010) and to "set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 14). Thus, environmentally sensitive literature can be "a catalyst for social action" (p. 12) and help us rethink how we interact with other Earth dwellers. In so doing, it may counteract the suicidal course taken by human civilisation. As Barry Commoner points out, "we are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem

Leonor María Martínez Serrano, Departamento de Filologías Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Plaza del Cardenal Salazar, 3, 14003, Córdoba (Spain), leonor.martinez.serrano@uco.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5114-9513

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

itself. The present system of production is self-destructive" (quoted in Rueckert, 1996, p. 116). If we take the planet's life, we are taking our own lives.

Drawing on Derrida's (2002) and Agamben's (2003) reflections on nonhuman animals, Abram's (1996, 2010) ecophilosophy, and Iovino's (2010) notion of "non-anthropocentric humanism", this article investigates *homo sapiens*'s embodied encounters with the animal *other* in *Ova Aves* (2011), a limited-edition letterpress book and a collaborative artistic project undertaken by prestigious Canadian photographer Thaddeus Holownia (born 1949) and award-winning poet-naturalist Harry Thurston (born 1950). *Ova Aves* is the first book in a series formed by *Icarus, the Falling of Birds* (2017) and *Of a Feather* (2024), to which Thurston and Holownia have contributed their artistic talents. Whether there might be a fourth or fifth book in the series remains to be ascertained in the future. At any rate, all three books constitute a sobering reminder that poetry is first and foremost a form of paying attention to what-is in its minutest details. Based in Tidnish Bridge, Nova Scotia, Thurston is one of Canada's best-known nature writers and has spent a whole lifetime paying attention to the more-than-human world, which has resulted in poetry collections and more than a dozen non-fiction books on environmental issues exploring the impact of anthropogenic action on the nonhuman world at large. All his works testify to his commitment as a writer, educator, and ecologist, for "[t]he common theme running through all of his books is a deep interest in the environment" (Mattinson, 2012, np). For his part, Holownia is also a polymath – a visual artist, letterpress printer, and publisher. He has been a professor in the Fine Arts Department of Mount Allison University for more than three decades. As a photographer of consummate talent, he has taken part in collaborative projects with various Canadian poets, including *Silver Ghost* (2008) and *Markland Tree* (2022) with Thurston.

Published by Anchorage Press, *Ova Aves* (Latin for *bird eggs*) is an accomplished tribute to eggs and to avian life in the Tantramar Marshes, or "a celebration – a hymn and a prayer – of eggs" (Rogers, 2011). It is a beautifully produced art object, a pleasure to hold in one's hands, and a fundamental addition to the body of ecopoetry that is being written nowadays in response to the unprecedented environmental crisis humankind is faced with. The collection offers an exploration of "both visual and textual interpretations of birds' eggs found in New Brunswick's Mount Allison University's biology collection" (Armstrong, 2012, p. 126). It comprises 13 poems and 13 full-colour photographs carefully arranged as a whole: the lefthand page shows Thurston's untitled poems written in ghazal-like couplets, while the righthand page shows Holownia's photos of the eggs, accompanied by English and Latin bird names that serve the purpose of cataloguing humans' encounter with the physical world. In piecing all these textual and visual elements together, and countering an anthropocentric conceptualisation of birds, Thurston conveys a deft denunciation of humans' disregard for nonhuman animals

and the alarming species extinction unleashed in the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). At the same time, he advocates respectful encounters between human and nonhuman bodies in the spirit of what Iovino (2010) has called "an extended, non-anthropocentric humanism" (p. 32), one that situates humanism in an ecological paradigm marked by an "ethical 'culture of co-presence'" (p. 32) and an enhanced awareness of "our ecological interdependence" (p. 33).

2. 'Shining out of the blackness of time'

Ova Aves is dedicated to two women, Gay and Cathy, Holownia's partner and Thurston's wife, respectively. Both women are central to the whole conception of this *livre d'artiste*. A biologist by training (like Thurston himself, whom she met while both were biology students at Acadia University), ornithologist Gay Hansen worked at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick, where hundreds of students benefited from her knowledge on and passion for birds. She tirelessly curated the egg collection at her university. As she said, "it is essential to educate people about birds – they are extremely important in ecological, environmental, cultural and recreational realms. Ornithology is one of the few fields of biology where citizen science makes significant contributions" (Anonymous, 2024). It is only a gesture of poetic justice that she should be one of the book's dedicatees. What follows the dedication is a quotation lifted from Joseph Brodsky's collection *Ab Ovo* (1996) that reads thus: "Ultimately, there should be a language in which / the word 'egg' is reduced to O entirely" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011[1]). Brodsky suggests that "the logic of language should dictate that the word for egg embody the form of the egg: signifier and signified – the word, both shape and sound, and its sense – in such intimate relation to each other that their distinctions are erased" (Rogers, 2011), with the "O" being "a long-standing symbol of wholeness, completeness" (Rogers, 2011). The fact that *Ova Aves*, a book about bird eggs, should open with this epigraph is obviously a deliberate decision. By deploying Brodsky's words as a paratextual threshold for readers to step into a book that weaves poetry and photography, Thurston and Holownia are inscribing their artistic undertaking in a constellation of previous texts also concerned with an investigation of the nonhuman. Poetry and science join efforts in *Ova Aves* to explore the evocative nature and mystery of eggs in themselves. According to Rogers (2011), "nature, science, language, and art are layered, membranous, and interpenetrative" in this collection. After all, as French philosopher Alain Badiou (1999) has convincingly argued, science, philosophy, art, love, and politics constitute forms of conversing with and shedding light on the world and the place humans occupy in the larger mesh of things. The book interweaves poetic and scientific approaches to the nonhuman as it manifests in bird eggs of a variety of species, which are palpable

[1] There are no page numbers in *Ova Aves.*

evidence of animal being and hold the promise of a new life. Time and again, the poems and the photographs underscore the beauty and fragility of the eggs as both physical entities and as *sui generis* works of art. Thurston composes well-wrought lyrics where each single word falls exactly into place to celebrate the uniqueness of each egg, whereas Holownia contributes high-resolution images where eggs seem to be art objects suspended mid-air and surrounded by utter darkness. At any rate, *Ova Aves* inscribes itself in a constellation of contemporary art forms that ponder, defy and provide alternatives to the dominant political, social and economic forms of neoliberal globalisation, as theorised by T. J. Demos[2] (2016, 2017), an art historian and cultural critic concerned with visual representations of anthropogenic action in contemporary art. As he notes, visual art can "play a critical role in raising awareness of the impact" of the Anthropocene on the web of life, showing, for instance, "the environmental abuse and human costs, of fossil fuel's everyday operations, mediating and encouraging a rebellious activist culture" (Demos, 2017, p. 58). In this regard, *Ova Aves* is one more artistic meditation on the fragility of the Earth and its dwellers in a world run amok.

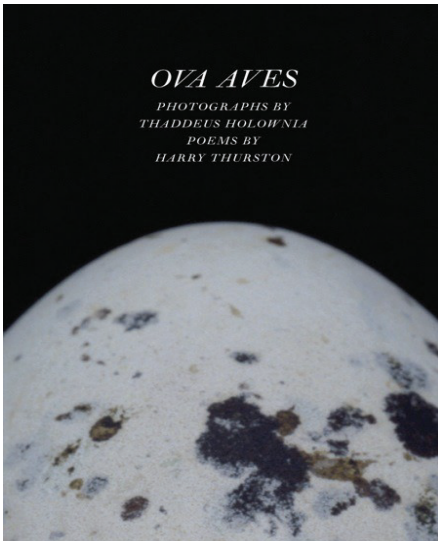

Figure 1: Front cover of *Ova Aves* (source: https://anchoragepress.ca/publications/ova-aves/)

Evidence of the scientific compulsion at work in *Ova Aves* is discernible in the short prose text titled "The Colour of Eggs" that readers encounter before definitively stepping into the book. The text consists of two quotes penned by Bernd Heinrich and Hansen, respectively. The former ponders how "the motion

[2] Demos only uses his initials to sign his research.

of the egg affects the colour patterns" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011) on its surface, whereas the latter emphasises the uniqueness of bird eggs: "All bird eggs have unique markings and colouration which are very much like a fingerprint" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011), she writes. Such markings exist for a good reason, as "[p]igments function as camouflage as well as reducing the harmful radiation from ultra violet light. The eggs of ground and nesting birds are heavily pigmented while hole nesters are often completely white" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). No two eggs are identical; the spots and streaks on their surface create unique patterns. Thus viewed, eggs are highly sophisticated entities whose very design serves a most practical purpose: ensuring the survival of the being *in potentia* they hold within themselves despite the myriad dangers lurking in their surroundings. As Hansen claims, "despite being so fragile, they are perfectly adapted to perpetuate their own kind" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). What eggs represent is the promise of a new life, protected within the thin walls of a temporary home that has a special kind of singularity. Most interestingly, the egg "is forged by the body of the bird, marked with the pigments of her womb" and "within the egg another body is being forged" (Rogers, 2011).

When the photographs gathered in *Ova Aves* were exhibited to the public, spectators were much more than simply scrutinising artistic images of bird eggs. Probably without their being aware, they were also being exposed to the nonhuman other. As Abram (2010) notes, "the simple act of perception is experienced as an interchange between oneself and that which one perceives – as a meeting, a participation, a communion between beings" (p. 268). In a landmark essay titled "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Jacques Derrida (2002) ponders the animal gaze and the question of animal being. An animal is conceived as "an existence that refuses to be conceptualized" (p. 379) and "the absolute other" (p. 380). The French philosopher argues that nudity is what we humans and animals share. Whereas humans are aware of their nakedness, "[t]he property unique to animals […] is their being naked without knowing it" (p. 373). Derrida then explores what it means for a human being to be seen naked by an animal, which offers to his sight "the abyssal limit of the human" (p. 381). To be seen in complete nudity by a nonhuman animal is an uncanny experience. As he notes, the vacant, uninterpretable animal gaze raises "the unsettling question, not of how *we* see animals, but of how they see *us*" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 218), a question rarely asked by philosophers. The thirteen poems making up *Ova Aves* were written in response to Holownia's photographs of bird eggs on facing pages, creating thus a conversation between two different art forms (verbal and visual) that opens up a space for close observation of what otherwise might have gone unnoticed for us. The poems are not subservient to the images nor the images to the poems. Rather, they exist as two complementary forms of investigating the nature of eggs as a natural extension of birds' bodies. In this regard, the photos "place

each egg in a universe of blackest black, so it floats into the eye of the viewer as if coming in from a far, unknown galaxy", whereas Thurston's poems "float on the facing page, black on white" (Rogers, 2011), directing readers' attention to the dialogue in each image-text pairing. In all cases, the focus is on the human gaze rather than the animal gaze, but the photographed eggs give us hints about what it may mean to be seen by the animal other. After all, as argued by Giorgio Agamben (2003), "*[h]omo* is a constitutively "anthropomorphous" animal […], who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human" (p. 27).

One of the most captivating aspects of *Ova Aves* has to do with poetic voice, namely, with the question of who speaks in the 13 poems in the sequence. In fact, a theme subtly running throughout the entire collection is the conundrum of speaking for or in the name of the animal other in a kind of poetry that is explicitly biocentric. In a non-anthropocentric poetic investigation of birds' being, how are poets to engage with and give voice to the animal other? Hard though it may try, ecopoetry seems to be condemned to rely on writing as a most sophisticated technology to convey birds' singular existence and speak on their behalf with a view to raising readers' awareness that it is a matter of utmost urgency to relate to the nonhuman with care and a sense of duty. The poetic voice in *Ova Aves* betrays an autobiographical substratum that suggests that Thurston's lyrical subject is the poet-naturalist looking at eggs with the eyes of a scientist and boundless curiosity. The amount of scientific data about each bird species packed into the poems is a clear indicator of the kind of poetic voice speaking in these pieces. It is no coincidence that in most of the poems it directly addresses different bird species, not readers. The closing piece is the only one where Thurston directly gives voice to a bird, the emu, an endangered species and the last of its kind.

In most poems (with just a couple of exceptions) in *Ova Aves*, the poetic voice directly addresses the species in question, drawing an anatomy of their singularity and hence underscoring their uniqueness and losability at a time of accelerated species extinction. In what might be considered a dexterously consummated ekphrastic exercise, the incipit poem in *Ova Aves* deliberately illustrates a photograph of a bird egg of unknown origin. Pondering that "We all must come from somewhere. Out of the blackness of time" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011), the poetic voice in Thurston's piece offers a cosmogony in words marked by utmost linguistic economy: "The sacred ibis spoke gods into being, / laying an egg from which the sun burst forth. / The rest is history" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). Thurston's opening piece situates the origin of the world in a mythical time, now lost in memory, and ascribes the beginnings of the Earth (including gods and human beings) to a specific bird species, the sacred ibis. It was an ibis (not a god or human being) that spoke everything that exists into being. Ibises even taught humans the advanced technology of writing to perpetuate their findings and insights into the deep future: "With their hooked beaks / down-turned like

the nibs of pens", these birds "gave us writing" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011)[3]. On the facing page, Holownia contributes a photograph of a white egg whose surface is pigmented with spots and streaks, shining against a pitch-dark backdrop that further enhances the egg's whiteness. The unfathomable dark space behind the egg suggests "the blackness of time" from which all life emerged eons of time ago. In fact, as Rogers points out, "[t]he association between eggs and the universe is ancient. Creation stories from several cultures depict the birth of the universe as the breaking of a cosmic egg" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). Both the cosmos and the egg "inhabit a realm of meaning which collapses definitions of beginning and ending, birth and death, interior and exterior" (Rogers, 2011).

When juxtaposed, both Thurston's poem on and Holownia's photograph of this unknown bird egg reveal a non-anthropocentric cosmogony that significantly differs from the biblical account found in the Book of Genesis, where God's primordial word – *fiat lux* – brings everything into being. Likewise, in the cosmogony found in Hesiod's *Theogony* in Graeco-Roman mythology, it was the god Uranus (the sky) who married the goddess Gea (the earth), bringing forth all forms of life, human and nonhuman. In Thurston's mythological account, it is a bird – not a god as a construct or figment of the human imagination – that creates the world and all the beings populating it. A myth is not to be dismissed as a naïve story that seeks to shed light on the real with premises alien to scientific discourse, since it is "a theorem about the nature of reality, expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate narrative form" (Bringhurst, 2007, p. 63). Like science or philosophy, it is an attempt at meaning-making before science and philosophy became dominant forms of knowing what-is in prevalent western epistemologies. By decentring human agency from the overall picture and offering a bird-centred mythical explanation of the origin of the world instead, Thurston and Holownia offer a timely reminder that humans are not the measuring rod of all things and beings on Earth. They also gesture towards the fact that there are alternative epistemologies that celebrate the imbrication of the human and the nonhuman as part of a totality comprising the mutual entanglements of earthbound beings in an act of shared becoming.

3. The fascinations of avian life

Up to twelve different bird species are celebrated in *Ova Aves*: the common loon (*Gavia immer*), the thick-billed murre (*Uria lomvia*), the ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*), the great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*), the black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*), the killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), the northern harrier

[3] Writing and the letters of the alphabet are said to have been inspired by the shapes formed by birds in the sky, or by footprints of birds' feet on the sand. An open book in the codex format evokes the wings of a bird indeed.

(*Circus cyaneus*), the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), the northern raven (*Corvus corax*), the red-winged blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), the common grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*), and the emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*). According to Hansen (2011), "while each species of bird lays characteristic eggs, there is still a surprising amount of variability within the eggs of a single species and even within the eggs of a single nest". Such variability is a clear indicator of how creative and prolific nature is as it manifests in existing animal (and more specifically bird) species. Since the very cradle of humanity, birds have held endless fascinations for humans. Whether in philosophy, religion, history or art, birds have played a central role and occupied a place of honour in the human imagination (Sax, 2021). However, if they exist, they are likely to be destroyed by humankind. Humans "began steadily reducing the population of birds around the world during the Neolithic era by over-exploitation, habitat destruction and introduction of invasive species" (Sax, 2021, p. 328). Later on, around the sixteenth or seventeenth century, "the killing of birds became far more deliberate, systematic and extensive, […] done with unprecedented exuberance" (p. 329). Nowadays, we are witnessing an alarming and accelerated anthropogenic-induced decimation of bird species (Kaplan, 2025) that is a cause of concern for biologists and ecopoets alike.

The second poem in *Ova Aves* is an accomplished celebration of the common loon (*Gavia immer*), a "most ancient, most prehistoric" bird, whose call hearkens back "to a time before humans / began to gawk at the night sky" and scrutinise "this cosmic commotion" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). Directly addressing the loon by means of an apostrophe, the poetic voice sees the loon as embodying "the belief in an abiding mystery, / something alive in the mute cosmos / besides our nattering selves" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). The loon is, in other words, a reminder that the Earth is an animate and expressive being, even if *homo sapiens* may have lost all sense of connection or communion with the world at large. As ecophilosopher David Abram observes, there is an urgent need for humans to reconnect with their own animal bodies as being an extension of breathing Earth. Like loons, humans are also born of the Earth – we are of "earthly nature" (Abram, 1996, p. 58) – and literally inscribed in the biosphere as the *oikos* of all life. The reference to "an abiding mystery" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011) in Thurston's poem belies that consciousness is not the sole prerogative of our species, but rather "a ubiquitous quality of the world" (Abram, 2010, p. 37). As such, "[m]ind arises, and dwells, between the body and the Earth, and hence is as much an attribute of this leafing world as of our own immodest species" (Abram, 1996, 112). There are specific signs in the book of nature needing no verbal tradition to make themselves understandable to others. Sensuously immersed in a world of vibrant, communicative matter, the lyrical subject in Thurston's poem perceives a concerto woven "out of the diverse vocalizations of other creatures",

with human poetry being just "a mode of participation in the polyphonic song of the Earth" (Rigby, 2016, 54). Hence the allusion in the poem to "A voice / that vibrates in the reptilian brain, echoing / an old word we once knew, need more than ever" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011) might be expressive of the fact that human language was created by analogy with the polyphony of nonhuman voices heard on Earth, even if humankind may have forgotten these ancestral origins.

In the poem addressed to the ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*), the poetic voice draws readers' attention to this species's "indelible signature at the bill tip, / from too much probing in the black earth" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011) in search of worms. Pondering the anatomy of this species, the poet's persona in this composition confesses a feeling of empathy, as he carries "smudged words / at my fingertips. Loafing, waiting / for something to turn up, to swallow it whole" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). If the ibis "gave us writing," the ring-billed gull is a metaphor for poets themselves to Thurston's mind. Whereas ring-billed gulls probe the earth with their beaks to pick the flesh of worms to appease their hunger, poets use language to express part of the grandeur and mystery of what-is. Poetry is present to begin with, it is an attribute of reality that poets seek to capture the best way they can through the medium of words. Poets are thus emotionally and intellectually alert to potential signs that they may swallow and digest to make it communicable to others in the form of poems. Although poems are inexhaustible verbal artefacts, they always fall short of the real. Ring-billed gulls are also poets of sorts; the environmental literacy deeply ingrained in their DNA allows them to instinctively probe the earth with their beaks in search of nourishment. By contrast, poets need to make a muscular effort and pay undivided attention to the world in the hopes that something may "turn up" and they might capture it before vanishing into airy nothingness.

Thurston's poem on the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is possibly one of the most accomplished pieces in the sequence. The poet writes: "All of us are worlds, planetary, alone, / wobbling through chaos" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011), as if to suggest that each person is a sphere, closed on the outside, following its own trajectory as a solipsistic entity, disentangled from the rest of existence. However, in subsequent lines he relies on a creation myth to underscore the vitality and interconnectedness of what-is: "From the egg of night was born Eros / who pierced us with life, even joy" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). It was Eros/ love that infused life into everything that exists in this world. As Karen Barad (2012) observes apropos this primordial element, "[e]ros, desire, life forces run through everything… […] [F]eeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers" (p. 59). What comes next is a celebration of the osprey in words that gesture towards how the elements making up the natural world coalesce to forge the osprey: "Burnt sienna and cobalt blue, the

alchemy / of earth, sky and water, swirl in your hovering flight" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). As one of the most ancient and powerful birds of prey, the osprey is celebrated for the magnificence of its flight: "stone-heavy, speed is your only mercy" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). Likewise, mythology pervades the poem on the northern raven (*Corvus corax*), which subtly packs a wealth of information – mythological and ornithological – into its lines as well. "When all the other voices have fallen silent, you rave on, / keeping the faith in the power of a few well-chosen syllables" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011), writes the poet addressing the raven, a bird that occupies a prominent place in the mythology of some of the First Nations of Canada as a trickster figure of amazing ingenuity. "You hatch the word, an original mischief", says the poet in words that seem to credit this bird species with the invention of language.

The poem addressed to the common grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) offers a picture of ill omen that is possibly related to the woes associated with the Anthropocene, the era of humankind: "When they cloud the sky above the dying earth, / we withdraw into the dark recesses of resignation: / The time is come, there is no turning back" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). In the new geological era dominated by *homo sapiens*, scientific evidence suggests that the damage caused by anthropogenic action has gone past a critical threshold and that humankind is bound to adapt to the conditions of a "dying earth". In the light of the current environmental crisis, ecopoetry like the one composed by Thurston seeks to "counteract the instrumentalism of hyper-rationalist and materialistic values and to celebrate 'the totality of nature' by engaging with human feelings and sympathies in a broadly intersubjective, mutually beneficial way" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 104). By directing readers' attention to eggs, Thurston is thus honing attention skills – his and ours – at a time of alarming attention deficits (Citton, 2017). Howewer, the Canadian poet is not alone in calling for a renewed form of attention to the nonhuman. He cultivates what Anna Tsing (2015) calls "arts of noticing," that is, a new kind of attentiveness aimed at collaborative survival on the part of humans and nonhumans alike. According to Tsing, modern capitalism has spread "ideas of progress" and "techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources" (p. 19), segregating the human from the nonhuman, devastating natural landscapes, and "obscuring collaborative survival" (p. 19) as a result. Humans, she argues, are part of shifting polyphonic assemblages marked by utter indeterminacy, which is "frightening" yet "makes life possible" (p. 20). Countering narratives of human exceptionalism, she points out that agency is not the sole prerogative of *homo sapiens* and that we are not the only species on Earth capable of making worlds. Underscoring the mutual entanglements across the biosphere, she writes that "all organisms make ecological living places, altering earth, air, and water. […] In the process, each organism changes everyone's world" (p. 22). Along similar lines, Donna Haraway (2016) has lucidly noted that

"ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding" (p. 13) and that the words 'human' and 'humus' are interconnected: "We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman" (p. 55). Against this backdrop, *Ova Aves* is an artistic project that seeks to raise awareness among readers of what it means to live at a time of climate crisis with responsibility, attending to the specifics of nonhuman animals, awakening to the shared vulnerability of human and nonhuman beings.

Ova Aves comes to an end with a poem on the emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*), a flightless bird species (and the third-tallest living bird) native to "down under", namely Australia, where "birds walk instead" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). As is common practice with Thurston, the poem is packed with a wealth of scientific information about this bird species. The voice readers get to listen to in this piece is the emu's: "I, emu, am the last of my kind" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). Aware that it is the only extant member of the genus *Dromaius*, the emu is an apt reminder of the havoc and piecemeal destruction caused by *homo sapiens* – of which species extinction is but one more example in a long litany of woes. Though females lay the eggs, it is the males who look after the young, who soon run "with their faithful parents, like dinosaurs / kicking along at 50 kilometres an hour / in a race to outdistance time" (Thurston & Holownia, 2011). The emu's gigantic egg is particularly beautiful, and one of Hansen's favourite ones: "extremely large, textured with a black bumpy rind-like surface, with specks of bright turquoise colour emerging from behind the black" (Hansen, 2011). It is no coincidence that *Ova Aves*, a collection concerned with the alarming species extinction rates unleashed in the Anthropocene, should close with a poem about the emu, the last of its kind.

4. Conclusion

In *Ova Aves*, Thurston and Holownia bring together poetry and science to pay homage to birds and their eggs as a symbol of completeness. The thirteen poem-photograph pairings constitute a moving meditation on the animal other as it manifests in bird eggs originally kept at Mount Allison University. By drawing readers' attention to the uniqueness and fragility of eggs, *Ova Aves* is a timely reminder of the need for humankind to rethink how we relate to the nonhuman in the human-dominated geological era of the Anthropocene, as well as an invitation to attend to the more-than-human world, of which we are a part, not apart from.

Announcement

This article was written under the umbrella of the Project PID2023-147494NB-I00, funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the State Investigation Agency, and the FEDER.

References

Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Pantheon.

Abram, D. (2010). *Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Agamben, G. (2003). *The open: Man and animal*. Stanford University Press.

Anchorage Press. (2011). Front cover of *Ova Aves*. https://anchoragepress.ca/publications/ova-aves/

Anonymous. (2024, May 12). Words & images: New book chronicles the beauty & love of birds. *The New Wark Times*. https://warktimes.com/2024/05/12/words-images-new-book-chronicles-the-beauty-love-of-birds/

Armstrong, T. (2012). Review of *Ova Aves* by Thaddeus Holownia and Harry Thurston. *The Goose*, *11*, 125–127.

Badiou, A. (1999). *Manifesto for philosophy* (N. Madarasz, Trans.). Ztr State University of New York Press.

Barad, D. (2012). Interview with Karen Barad. In R. Dophijn & I. van der Tuin (Eds.), *New materialism: Interviews and cartographies* (pp. 48–70). Open Humanities Press.

Bringhurst, R. (2007). The meaning of mythology. In *Everywhere being is dancing: Twenty pieces of thinking* (pp. 63–72). Gaspereau Press.

Bristow, T. (2015). *The Anthropocene lyric*: *An affective geography of poetry, person, place*. Palgrave Pivot.

Bryson, J. S. (2002). *Ecopoetry: A critical introduction*. University of Utah Press.

Citton, Y. (2017). *The ecology of attention*. Polity.

Crutzen, P. J., & Stoermer, E. F. (2000). The Anthropocene. *The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter*, *41*, 17–18.

Demos, T. J. (2016). *Decolonizing nature: Contemporary art and the politics of ecology*. Sternberg Press.

Demos, T. J. (2017). *Against the Anthropocene: Visual culture and environment today*. Sternberg Press.

Derrida, J. (2002). The animal that therefore I am (and more). *Critical Inquiry*, *28*(2), 369–418.

Gilcrest, D. W. (2002). *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics*. University of Nevada Press.

Hansen, G. (2011). An egg is miracle enough. *The New Quarterly*, *219*. https://tnq.ca/story/egg-miracle-enough/

Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2015). *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment*. Routledge.

Iovino, S. (2010). Ecocriticism and a non-anthropocentric humanism: Reflections on local natures and global responsibilities. In L. Volkmann, N. Grimm, I. Detmers, & K. Thomson (Eds.), *Ecocritical perspectives on the new English literatures* (pp. 29–53). Brill.

Kaplan, G. (2025). Human-caused high direct mortality in birds: Unsustainable trends and ameliorative actions. *Animals*, *15*(1), 73. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15010073

Mattinson, S. (2012). In conversation with... Harry Thurston. *Field Notes*. http://fieldnotescumberland.blogspot.com/2012/06/in-conversation-withharry-thurston.html

Rigby, K. (2016). Earth's poesy: Romantic poetics' natural philosophy, and biosemiotics. In H. Zapf (Ed.), *Handbook of ecocriticism and cultural ecology* (pp. 45–64). De Gruyter.

Rogers, J. (2011). "All that is made": The *Ova Aves* project. *The New Quarterly*, *219*. https://tnq.ca/story/made-ova-aves-project/

Rueckert, W. (1996). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. In C. Glotfelty, & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader. Landmarks in literary ecology* (pp. 105–123). University of Georgia Press.

Sax, B. (2021). *Avian illuminations. A cultural history of birds*. Reaktion Books.

Shoptaw, J. (2016, January 4). Why ecopoetry? There's no planet B. *Poetry.*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70299/why-ecopoetry

Thurston, H., & Holownia, T. (2008). *Silver ghost: An homage to the Atlantic salmon rivers*. Anchorage Press.

Thurston, H., & Holownia, T. (2011). *Ova aves*. Anchorage Press.

Thurston, H., & Holownia, T. (2017). *Icarus, the falling of birds*. Anchorage Press.

Thurston, H., & Holownia, T. (2022). *Markland tree*. Anchorage Press.

Thurston, H., & Holownia, T. (2024). *Of a feather*. Anchorage Press.

Tsing, A. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Duke University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 1 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Saba Sangeen, National Institute of Technology Srinagar, India
Jaya Shrivastava, National Institute of Technology Srinagar, India

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.1.91-104

Africanfuturistic Cosmovision: Tricksterism in Nnedi Okorafor's *Remote Control*

ABSTRACT
Nnedi Okorafor's *Remote Control* (2021) offers a nuanced Africanfuturist narrative in which myth, magic, and technology converge to shape a speculative vision of Ghana. This paper examines the protagonist Sankofa's journey through the theoretical lens of the technological trickster, a hybrid figure drawn from African mythological traditions and speculative technoculture. Utilizing Faucheux and Lavender III's concept of *tricknology*, Sankofa emerges not merely as a symbolic character but as an active agent of disruption, challenging conventions surrounding race, gender, and futurity. The novella redefines traditional notions of African femininity, particularly highlighting motherhood, domesticity, and submission by centering a technologically empowered Black female figure. Ultimately, the work contributes to the expanding field of Africanfuturist literature that critiques colonial legacies and systemic injustices while offering alternative knowledge systems rooted in African cosmologies.

KEYWORDS
trickster; tricknology; liminality; africanfuturism

1. Introduction

An embodiment of chaos and paradox, the trickster is an unpredictable figure known for transgressing boundaries, breaking rules, and subverting systemic structures. By disregarding normative codes of behaviour, the trickster challenges accepted regulations that constrain individuals and opens up alternative ontological possibilities. The trickster is a ubiquitous figure found in varying forms across different cultures, as depicted in mythology, folklore, and literature, inhabiting the "boundaries or crossroads, sometimes navigating them, sometimes creating them" (Maurone, 2002, p. 229), thereby allowing them to exist interstitially. As an agent of change and reformation, the trickster

Saba Sangeen, Department of Humanities, Social Sciences & Management, National Institute of Technology Srinagar, Hazratbal, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, saba_2021phahss008@nitsri.ac.in, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7178-272X
Jaya Shrivastava, Department of Humanities, Social Sciences & Management, National Institute of Technology Srinagar, Hazratbal, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, Phone: 00917006937535, jayashrivastava@nitsri.ac.in, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3491-7285

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

prompts us to see the perspective of the oppressed groups instead of passively accepting the social order based on dominance and suppression. Folklorists and anthropologists have studied the trickster figure through the oral traditions of different cultures worldwide, including Native American, African American, and Caribbean cultures. They may take on human or animal forms, depending on the culture of origin. In West African folklore, the most famous trickster is the spider Anansi, a symbol of resistance and survival who uses wit and trickery to gain advantage over powerful opponents. Esu-Elegbara is a trickster figure commonly found in the Yoruba culture of West Africa, acting as a guardian of crossroads that separate the divine and the profane. As a result, the "tricksters of West African origin are symbols of freedom and revolt" (Marshall, 2010, p. 190). The overturning of hierarchical roles and questioning of authority reconstruct conventional societal norms, as the "essence of tricksterism is change, contradiction, adaptation and surprise" (Ammons, 1994, p. xii). They act as a conduit for social change by advocating for freedom and using their tactics to build an equitable future for their community.

Nnedi Okorafor (2014) engages in tricksterism by redefining the potential of science fiction. She reappropriates the genre to reflect Black realities, arguing that science fiction is "practically made to redress political and social issues" by promoting inclusivity and diversity (Okorafor, 2014). She rejects the Afrofuturist label, arguing it reflects Western epistemology and centres African-American experiences, thereby overlooking those of continental Africans. Cultural critic Mark Dery (1994), who first coined the term 'Afrofuturism,' described it as a form of signification that "appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future" to address African-American concerns (p. 136). However, Okorafor coined the term 'Africanfuturism' to describe her fiction, which encompasses the experiences of people from the African continent while also including Black people from the diaspora. This Afrocentric subcategory of science fiction does not adhere to Eurocentric standards of storytelling; instead, it embraces the existing African knowledge systems, including histories, myths, folklore and cultural practices. The disassociation from the universally accepted Western frameworks allows writers to envision hopeful futures for Black individuals, linking cultural traditions with new technological possibilities. The Africanfuturist framework contains narratives "sometimes with aliens, sometimes with witches, often set in a recognisable, future Africa, with African lineages – that are not cultural hybrids [diasporic] but rooted in the history and traditions of the continent, without a desire to look towards Western culture" (Okorafor, 2019). The need to foreground Black people and their rich cultural legacies in a futuristic context is crucial for combating the negative stereotypes often associated with Africa or the lack of representation of African people within the science fiction canon. This form of fiction seamlessly blends science with magic and folkloric

elements taken from the indigenous epistemology to represent Africans beyond the Western influence. Africanfuturist strategies of storytelling often blend oral traditions with futuristic speculation to invoke Black creativity and agency while simultaneously critiquing the Eurocentric ideologies like racism, colonialism and patriarchy.

Remote Control (2021) is a coming-of-age novella that explores themes of loss, grief, death, childhood trauma, and identity crisis. It chronicles the journey of a teenage girl living in a futuristic Ghanaian town called Wulugu, who possesses the unique ability to summon death after imbuing herself with the power of an alien artefact. After a tragedy that renders her an orphan, she forgets her name, Fatima, and adopts a new identity as Sankofa, a symbolic figure of death. She leaves her hometown to recover the lost seed and search for answers about the source of her powers and the purpose of the unearthly green light she emits, which is lethal to living beings. Against the backdrop of an alien invasion, she grapples with her human-alien identity while confronting the impact of corporate exploitation in her native country. In keeping with Africanfuturist tradition, the novella fuses local legend, myth, and indigenous cosmologies with advanced technology. The liberatory future visualised in the novella is based on the Ghanaian concept of *Sankofa*, an Akan epistemic principle that emphasises the reclamation of the past to shape one's present and future. This concept echoes the protagonist Sankofa's literal and metaphorical embodiment of this philosophy through her quest to retrace the origin of her powers, which leads her back to her hometown, thereby emphasising the need to honour one's roots and heritage.

Using trickery and manipulation as tools for survival and resistance, tricknology, or trickster technology, serves as a framework through which people challenge the status quo in pursuit of autonomy and liberation. This freedom technology includes "any practical knowledge that helps Black people solve problems, escape oppression, and reclaim control" (Toliver, 2021, p. xxxii). The trickster uses any necessary survival tactics to subvert forms of oppression and "triggers the breakdown of race and gender anxieties leading to freedom" (Lavender III, 2019, p. 97). The stratagems used by the trickster, be it fair or foul, bring lasting transformation, often benefiting Black people. The undermining of dominant ideologies through the decolonial lens of *Sankofa* philosophy is a way for Black people to reclaim their cultural identity by critiquing the residual colonial legacies and Western value systems that often threaten to suppress or erase the existing indigenous traditions. Thus, this study examines how a young Black teenage girl utilises tricksterism as a means to achieve agency and freedom by advocating for social change. She embodies the trickster archetype by assuming the role of an underdog who triumphs over neocolonial organisations through cleverness, rather than brute force.

2. Trickster discourse

Remote Control follows the journey of a teenage girl, Fatima, who lives on a small shea farm owned by her family. She suffered from frequent bouts of malaria and found respite by gazing at the stars and drawing the constellations in the soil. Fatima had learned the names and shapes of the constellations, which she called "sky words" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 18), from her grandfather, leading her family to endearingly refer to her as a "starwriter" (p. 17). This early motif of celestial literacy not only foregrounds Fatima's liminal position between the mundane and the cosmic but also aligns her with the trickster's traditional role as a boundary-crosser, one who mediates between human and divine realms, as well as between nature and culture. In Yoruba cosmology, the trickster divine figure, Elegba, is considered "a mediator between men and gods" (Wescott, 1962, p. 337). This role aligns with Fatima/Sankofa's efforts to negotiate between the human and divine realms. Moreover, the "starwriting" and celestial literacy evoke West African Dogon cosmologies, which preserve "astral knowledge of the star system, Sirius" largely "through oral traditions" (Effiong, 2018, p. 1). Such resonances invite reading the novella in conversation with multiple African cosmologies and project a cosmovision in which rich interpretative parallels co-exist. Fatima's metamorphosis into Sankofa is brought about by a road accident while crossing a busy intersection. This impact caused a surge of heat in her body, induced by the pain. Before she could get up, a car rammed into her, sending her flying across the street. As she landed on the side of the street, her brother came barreling towards her, but before he could reach her, "the pain came. This was the moment when Fatima forgot her name. It was a pain that tumbled to her soul. Later, she would understand that it wasn't just a pain. It was a beginning. And this beginning annihilated all that came before it" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 32). Her body exudes a bright green glow, and before she could contain it, the light had annihilated the entire town in a single flash. As she recovers from the impact, she notices that "everyone was asleep" because she was not able to fathom the fact that her deadly green light had killed all the people around her, including her brother (p. 32). As a mere seven-year-old, she could hardly wrap her head around the concept of death, believing that people who lay on the road were in a deep slumber. As she tries to make sense of what had transpired, she notes to her dismay that "she couldn't remember her name" even though she could recall her family and memories associated with them (p. 33). The trauma of seeing her family's dead bodies and the extreme surge of power leads her to lose her memory of her name and only the "name Sankofa was echoing in her mind, filling empty confused crevices" (p. 39). The act of forgetting her name and identity marks a pivotal turning point in the story, altering the trajectory of her life and setting her on a path of self-discovery. This moment of trauma signifies her transformation into a posthuman trickster figure, as the erasure of her former self becomes a symbolic rebirth that disrupts the boundaries between life and death, self and other.

The Afrocentric philosophy of *Sankofa* is a concept taken from West Africa, inspired by the Akan people of Ghana. *Sankofa* theory suggests "the value of a reflection on the past, a pensive entity on a decision, self-definition, identity, and individual, collective vision and destiny of a people" (Asante & Mazama, 2009, p. 587). It is an ancient African wisdom that emphasises the fact that one cannot envisage a future without first understanding the past. The lessons and mistakes of the past serve as a guiding force for the people, enabling them to build a better future while remaining true to their African roots. This concept is visually represented by a mythical bird with its feet firmly planted forward, and its head turned backwards. Like the bird, the protagonist of *Remote Control*, aptly named Sankofa, continuously looks back by reflecting on the past to reclaim wisdom and knowledge for building a viable future for her community. She even draws an illustration of a Sagittarius constellation upside down, resembling an image of a Sankofa bird. When a meteor shower hits her town, one of the green streaks lands on the swirl of the Sankofa bird that she had drawn on the base of the shea tree. As she picks up the glowing seed from the soil, the "light pooled in her palm and seemed to absorb into her skin", instantly curing her malaria fever (Okorafor, 2021, p. 18). The accidental nature of her transformation, catalysed by an act as innocent as star-gazing and soil-drawing, mirrors the trickster's hallmark unpredictability and their ability to enact disruption through seemingly mundane actions. This moment marks the symbolic birth of her trickster identity, one that will destabilise established structures and question techno-colonial interventions while also illuminating new modes of knowing and being.

The trickster exists on the periphery, operating at the edge by existing "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1967, p. 93) various epistemological boundaries, which is "neither this nor that, and yet is both" (p. 98). Although Sankofa is unaware of the alien seed and its power, upon touching it, she absorbs alien energy, becoming a hybrid caught between human and extraterrestrial consciousness. The symbiosis with the powers derived from the alien seed places her on the margins where she wrestles to find a sense of belonging in her liminal state. Her metamorphosis into "adopted child of the Angel of Death" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 46), the one who decimates living things with her green radiation, is essential because "tricksters are known for changing their skin" (Hynes & Doty, 1993, p. 51). Existing on the human-alien epistemological boundary gives her a vantage point to understand multiple modes of existence. As Faucheux and Lavender III (2018) assert, trickster agency in the African context is inextricably tied to race and survival: "trickster agency still depends on her default identity as a Black woman doing what she must to survive" (p. 38). This framing deepens the understanding of Sankofa's hybridity as not merely extraterrestrial or symbolic, but grounded in the lived realities of racialized survival and agency, anchoring her liminality within the intersection of technological power, Black womanhood, and systemic precarity.

A trickster thrives on duality and is fundamentally ambiguous, existing on the margin between good and evil. As a "mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox", the trickster disrupts categories and confounds the established boundaries (Hyde, 1998, p. 7). This is reminiscent of African tricksters like Esu-Elegbara and Anansi, who oscillate between being harbingers of wisdom and constructors of chaos. Likewise, Sankofa is also torn between the duality of life and death, trying to face her moral dilemma. She does not always use her power to kill people deliberately. Instead, she exhibited benevolence when people asked her to use her green light to hasten their death. In one instance, a person dying from cancer had asked her to use her green light and relieve him from the pain and agony. At another time, a woman whose son was on life support asked her to ease his suffering. By this time, she had become adept in using her powers and she "could purposely call forth her light at very close proximity, enough to take a life" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 46). She acts like an angel, relieving people from pain and misery. Other times, she summons death to defend herself and obliterate people who threaten her life. At the same time, she travels alone, earning her a reputation as both an angel of mercy and an incarnation of death. Therefore, a trickster embodies "both a creative and a destructive force" (Scheub, 2012, p. 32). This dual capacity for creation and destruction not only defines the trickster archetype but also positions Sankofa as a liminal figure who destabilises binary logic itself.

Sankofa later succeeds in decentering corporate control in her native town and advocates for change, inclusivity, and diversity. She adheres to the *Sankofa* philosophy when she undertakes the quest to retrieve the stolen seed, in order to understand the purpose of her powers. During her journey, she incorporates Ghanaian customs into her routine by wearing her mother's wig, applying shea butter to her dry skin and eating native foods. Ultimately, she comes full circle, back to her hometown to bury the seed in its original place, transforming her grief into resilience by refusing to let her past traumas affect her potential. She integrates the lessons from her journey across Ghana to cultivate wisdom, courage and a sense of purpose, practically embodying the idea of extracting knowledge from the past. The concept of *Sankofa* transcends the normative perception of time and space, as it allows for the simultaneous existence of past, present, and future. Okorafor's africanfuturist framework, which established a connection with indigenous history and culture, coincides with the *Sankofa* principle, which also aims to develop a connection to one's past. Both philosophies believe the African continent is "a place where real people possess a respected past and a potentially interesting future" (Kilgore, 2008, p. 122). Okorafor stresses the need to return to the "past to move forward the aspirations of an entire race in all of its cultural complexities" (Lavender III, 2019, p. 2). The decolonial underpinnings of this framework enable Okorafor to utilise motifs, mythology, beliefs, and settings

inspired by indigenous Ghanaian culture, which aligns with the spirit of Africanfuturism —a method of reclaiming African cultural identity. Okorafor's rendition of Africa in the novella is based on her model of tricksterism, a place where binaries coexist – past and future, science and myth, technology and magic, tradition and modernity, rationality and mysticism, good and evil, creation and destruction- all seamlessly blend to create a new reality based on assimilation and syncretism.

3. Trickstar

In the field of trickster studies, female tricksters are underrepresented, particularly those who employ subversive strategies, including deception, misdirection, theft, and mimicry, to gain an advantage. Marilyn Jurich uses the term 'trickstar' to define and represent the female tricksters who use various strategies ranging from deceit, subterfuge, lying, manipulation, duping, and stealing to outsmart the male characters and become "stars in trickery" (Jurich, 1998, p. xiv). Trickstars function as agents of transformation, often resisting male-dominated structures in pursuit of autonomy since "all the standard tricksters are male. […] these tricksters may belong to patriarchal mythologies, ones in which the prime actors, even oppositional actors, are male" (Hyde, 1998, p. 335). Historically, the figure of the trickster was always male, often considered to have a high libido and sexual appetite. In traditional societies, male tricksters had the freedom to wander and enjoy unrestricted mobility, guided by their own free will because "the criterion of masculinity and the privilege of autonomy and mobility with which masculinity is synonymous" (Landay, 1998, p. 2). However, female tricksters often diverge from traditional male archetypes, particularly in how their mobility and subversion confront patriarchal expectations commonly found in most tales. Trickster qualities of bending rules and disobeying boundaries went against the patriarchal vision of femininity, which was based on submission and compliance. The trickstars have to create therefore "a new relationship with the historical adversity and hostility found in Western consciousness toward females manifesting autonomy, agency, and authenticity as single, fulfilled, physically strong, and psychologically whole individuals" (Tannen, 2007, p. 10). Using marginality to their advantage, women could "rescue themselves and others through tricks, pursue what they need or desire through tricks, transform what they find unworkable or unworthy through tricks" (Jurich, 1998, p. xvii). As a mode of resistance, the trickstar narrative reclaims agency for women in folklore and fiction, destabilising hegemonic gender ideologies embedded in cultural storytelling.

Sankofa's otherworldly powers save her several times during her perilous journey, granting her the autonomy her patriarchal community had denied her. In her case, the quality of the trickstar involves the "notion of female tricksters as double agents, women who operate using strategies both subversive and transformative in

order to construct their own identities but also to effect social change" (Tatar, 2014, p. 46). When Sankofa decides to undertake the solitary journey to find answers to her questions, she gradually crosses the boundaries of gender expectations by constructing "new concepts of selfhood, gender and race relationship and community" (Cai, 2008, p. 276). She rejects the expected gender roles, those of domesticity, conventional femininity, marriage, and motherhood: "But she didn't want a husband like the other girls. If she had a husband, she wouldn't be allowed to travel much. I'll get my husband when I'm very old" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 31). During her travel, she dreams about her aunt Nana, a successful woman living in the West. She reprimands Sankofa for living like a vagabond and hiding from the world: "If you hide forever, you'll never find anything. And there is one thing you know you want to find. Go and find it, stupid nonsense child" (p. 42). If her aunt had done the same thing in the prime of her youth, she could not have earned a doctorate and gone on to become a physicist. If she decided to stay back in her hometown, her aunt, like countless other women, would be "shackled to a husband and children" (p. 42). Her aunt stresses the importance of a woman's identity and the need for freedom to live one's life on one's own terms. This moment brings Sankofa out of her trance, and she vows to find the seed that will help her reclaim her identity. Now that she has a clear motive, even though she was "young and alone, yet she was dangerous" (p. 43). The female trickster has to improvise in dire situations by utilising her resourcefulness in a crisis. She knows no external saviour will intervene; her survival depends entirely on her ingenuity.

Since trickstars exhibit qualities of strength and survival, they are reduced to prejudicial stereotypes. Often called a "child of devil", people across Ghana fear Sankofa and treat her with reverence as they believe that her alien powers are a form of witchcraft because she brought death and misfortune wherever she went (Okorafor, 2021, p. 13). The phrase 'Remote Control' is a Ghanaian slang for witchcraft, used to describe an object that can control people from a distance, like a remote that switches the television on and off with a single click (Okorafor, 2023). Witches used black magic and other occult practices to influence and manipulate people, even when they were not physically present. Sankofa is a "real life remote control" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 12) because her power gives her the ability to kill people without even touching them. Trickstars are often "treated as an outcast" (Jurich, 1998, p. 34). After she acquires the power of death, Sankofa is treated as an outsider, and she never fully assimilates into society again. Sankofa refuses prescribed gender expectations. Although her independence results in social ostracism, it ultimately enables her to challenge and change the damaging stereotypes associated with women. She is anything but meek and passive and is unafraid despite undergoing a series of traumatic events in her teenage life. Sankofa's defiance aids her in combating the common notion of equating "fatalism for blackness" (Womack, 2013, p. 11) since she uses tricknology as a medium

of "resistance and disruption to offset a system dependent on the near universal victimization of blacks" (Faucheux & Lavender III, 2018, p. 34). As theorised by Faucheux and Lavender III, tricknology fuses technological agency with cultural subversion, enabling Black women like Sankofa to challenge hegemonic narratives by manipulating social, mythical, and technological codes. Her alien power, misread as witchcraft, becomes a tool of epistemic rebellion, positioning her liminal and racialized identity as an active site of Africanfuturist resistance and survival. Womack (2013) challenges the trope of inevitable suffering in Black narratives, asserting that speculative fiction must offer visions of empowerment and futurity. The women characters, like Sankofa, exhibit rationality, resilience, and assertiveness in testing times, and they "do not embark on their journeys seeking treasure, but when they return, the treasure they have found is themselves" (Lindow, 2017, p. 64). The underrepresented female tricksters refuse to victimise themselves. Instead, they choose to strive for personal autonomy.

Tricksterism becomes a strategic tool for survival when "confronted with a more powerful opponent, a trickster cannot rely on traditional methods of struggle" (Szmańko, 2008, pp. 43–44). Sankofa is unaware of the origins of the alien artefact, which she stumbles upon by chance on her family's shea farm. She adored the wooden box and the seed inside because it was "a nice thing that listens" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 21). However, a politician comes to take the wooden box containing the alien seed so that he can sell it to LifeGen Corporation to get money for election campaigns. LifeGen Corporation was an American pharmaceutical giant tracking extraterrestrial activity in Ghana via satellite surveillance. They were an "international corporate-level remote control" who wanted the alien artefact for conducting unethical experiments on humans by creating human-alien hybrids like Sankofa (p. 95). They had monitored a meteor shower, an alien infiltration; they knew something had fallen from the sky and was now buried in the shea tree in Sankofa's backyard. It is only when the politician's bodyguard steals the artefact that Sankofa must pursue him across towns to acquire what belongs to her, which otherwise he was going to sell to "LifeGen, that fucking big American corporation that's probably going to eventually destroy the world" since "pharmaceuticals weren't their only focus" (p. 49). Through the eyes of a teenager, Okorafor uncovers the nexus of corporate control and the exploitation of Africans who are subjected to unscrupulous surveillance, data collection, and genetic modifications without their consent. Okorafor critiques neocolonial corporate encroachment and the political exploitation of vulnerable rural communities against the background of alien arrival. In doing so, Okorafor uses the figure of the trickster to mediate between Western techno-modernity and African epistemological frameworks, showing that technology and indigenous knowledge are not opposing forces but co-constitutive within her Africanfuturist vision.

Tricksters typically "tend to inhabit crossroads, open public places, doorways, and thresholds. They are usually situated between the social cosmos and the other world or chaos" (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p. 159). Even when she was little, she used to find solace near a shea tree near her family's house, often perched on the branches, reading her books. She used to play with the dirt at the base of this tree, usually drawing constellations and stars in the soil. After she leaves her hometown, she often lurks in the forest to hide from public scrutiny. Tricksters represent the innate human desire for change, so they constantly search for home because "their appetites drive their wanderings" (Hyde, 1998, p. 8). They cannot live in a state of stagnation; to grow, they move from one place to another to meet new people and explore new places. The power of death was something Sankofa never wanted, but the eventual demise of her family propels her to search for the alien artefact and understand why she was its intended recipient in the first place. She undertakes an arduous journey, travelling across towns of Ghana with her solitary companion, a fox she names Movenpick because she was "curious to see what was outside of Wulugu was curious to see why whenever she felt this strange heat, pain caused her to … flare" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 29). Her quest is crucial to understand why she became the "adopted Daughter of Death, a transformation that has unsettled her and snatched normalcy from her life" (p. 48). The power derived from the alien seed hinders her from touching any technological equipment, as her touch disables it, including drones, self-driving cars, and other automated infrastructure. Therefore, she has to undertake the journey on foot. Her ability to neutralise technology can also be perceived as a critique of widespread globalisation and technological upsurge at the cost of erasing the rich African heritage, emphasising the dangerous consequences of human over-reliance on machines. Since Sankofa has a detrimental effect on human technology, she can only overcome her anguish and change her situation by using "tricksterism as a form of technology itself" (Faucheux & Lavender III, 2018, p. 33) and aligns herself with the trickster ethos by destabilising techno-corporate hegemony. She imbibes the philosophical stance of celebrating one's culture while navigating the future to understand the implications of challenges posed by unchecked encroachments from influential organisations in the guise of development.

Sankofa's journey takes her to RoboTown, where she stumbles upon the wooden box she had searched for many years. The town thrived on advanced technology, including robots and drones, for traffic control and navigation. The artificially intelligent robots, called Robocops, spoke the native language in an automated female voice and flashed the colours of the traffic lights to facilitate vehicular and pedestrian movement. Before the Robocops, the busy intersection in town was a chaotic mess, plagued by frequent traffic jams, car collisions, and road rage incidents. The Robocop monitored Sankofa's movement as she arrived in this town, and one of the drones followed her closely to track her. The scan

returned no data about her in Robocop's database since she had "no digital footprint" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 75). As her power renders technology defunct, the moment she touches the drone, "it stopped functioning, dead in her grasp" (p. 72). The Robocop monitoring the intersection malfunctions due to the disabled drone, leading to a tragic accident at the busy crossing that results in the death of a child. A mob quickly gathers to expel Sankofa from RoboTown, hurling slurs at her – "BAD LUCK! YOU'RE BAD LUCK! WITCH! EVIL REMOTE CONTROL! SATAN!" (p. 76). As the crowd assaults her and she collapses to the ground, Sankofa desperately tries to suppress the green light within her, unwilling to harm the town she had come to see as her only home: "She would not harm RoboTown. This was the only home she had" (p. 77). However, her power proves uncontrollable. The green light bursts forth involuntarily, killing dozens around her, including Alhaja, the one person in RoboTown she had come to trust and consider a friend. The shock of losing someone dear to her propels her to flee the town with one of the Robocops still tailing her. The Robocop reveals that its primary function is to report data on individuals to LifeGen covertly. As Sankofa is missing from their database, the corporation is actively attempting to gather information about her to understand and ultimately exploit her: "LifeGen studies you. Then it will find use for you" (p. 78). She understands the suspicious activities of the LifeGen Corporation, which kept the people of RoboTown under strict surveillance and used their information for research without their consent. Okorafor (2021) critiques techno-authoritarianism by portraying RoboTown as a dystopian microcosm, where indigenous lives are subjected to extraction, surveillance, and control under the guise of progress. Through the depiction of covert data collection by LifeGen and the dehumanising effects of AI governance, she illustrates how unregulated technological surveillance functions as a neocolonial apparatus, stripping autonomy, erasing identities, and commodifying bodies without consent.

Another hallmark of the trickster figure is the ability to subvert dominant power structures using tools at their disposal, often becoming "spearheads of a cultural revolution" (Ingwersen, 2017, p. 257). After losing her dear friend Alhaja and a semblance of home, Sankofa returns to her hometown, completing a symbolic cycle of return. As she reflects, "she'd changed and grown since she left Wulugu; she had power now. It was just a matter of remembering, truly remembering and accepting" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 85), alluding to the *Sankofa* principle of learning from the past. Although Sankofa has lost everything - her family, her given name, and a sense of belonging -this loss catalyses her transformation. She asserts, "I am Sankofa, I belong wherever I want to belong", reclaiming agency over her identity and mobility (p. 53). This understanding is pivotal for her inner growth because she finally realises her self-worth despite how much she had loathed herself for killing her family. When she buries the seed back to its original spot, she can recall her name and reconcile her dual identity: "My name is Fatima Okwan.

But I'm Sankofa, too" (p. 94). Later, she witnesses a strange sight of green seeds glowing at the base of all the shea trees in her backyard. She realises that the LifeGen Corporation could misuse these alien seeds by illegally harvesting and experimenting on them. In a deliberate act of resistance, she unleashes her power to destroy the seeds, choosing to erase what could be weaponised. Tricksters act as the "*prima causa* of disruptions and disorders, misfortunes and improprieties" (Hynes & Doty, 1993, p. 35). Through her defiance, Sankofa unsettles the techno-capitalist logic of LifeGen, employing trickster strategies not for mischief but for the survival and liberation of the inhabitants of Wulugu. Her intervention exemplifies how Africanfuturist tricksterism facilitates a reimagining of power, selfhood, and the future beyond neocolonial constraints.

4. Conclusion

The trickster fosters cultural development and liberates societies from oppression by actively shaping new ways of being, ultimately contributing to a more habitable and inclusive world. These liminal figures bring about destruction by dismantling systemic institutions, resulting in chaos and upheaval; yet, this chaos often serves as a necessary prelude to transformation. The subversive trickster discourse in the novella unravels through the perspective of a Black teenage girl who becomes a "culture-bringer" by exhibiting defiance and resistance against the dominant discourses of patriarchy and colonialism (Jurich, 1998, p. 31). A trickster merges two seemingly contradictory archetypes: the selfish buffoon, driven by personal desire and cunning, and the culture-hero, a "transformer who makes the world habitable for humans by ridding it of monsters or who provides things that make human society possible" (Carroll, 1981, p. 305). Sankofa initially embodies the traits of a selfish buffoon when she vows to retrieve the alien seed to better understand her powers. However, as the "adopted daughter of death" (Okorafor, 2021, p. 48), she undergoes a radical transformation into a culture-hero, determined to protect her people from the exploitative designs of colonial Western organisations. Sankofa disrupts social hierarchies by dismantling the colonial power trying to control her native place. Their motive of harnessing the mysterious power of the alien seed forces her to reclaim her future by putting an end to their potential takeover. She subverts cultural conventions by being a wanderer and not subscribing to the expected gender roles. Moving from place to place also brings about internal growth for Sankofa, who, choosing a vagabond life, negates the spatial boundaries that bind her. Trickster technology enables Sankofa to rend the social fabric, dispelling Western categorisations and paving the way for celebrating indigenous cultural legacies by triggering the "breakdown of race and gender anxieties, leading to the end of these interlocking oppressions in one kind of Afrofuture" (Faucheux & Lavender III, 2018, p. 31). Sankofa symbolises freedom and "can never be fixed, captured, or contained" (Marshall, 2010, p. 190). The recentering

of the African worldview in *Remote Control* creates a cosmovision – a holistic and interconnected worldview where mystical, spiritual, and technological aspects can coexist simultaneously. Okorafor's depiction of Sankofa, deeply rooted in African cosmologies, presents the trickster as a hybrid figure who embodies the syncretic, adaptive nature of African cultural legacy. The dismantling of dominant ideologies, the exposure of racism, injustice, and unethical experimentation, and the championing of marginalised voices all reflect the enduring power of the trickster. Through Sankofa, the novella affirms that transgression, when harnessed with purpose, can forge paths to survival, resistance, and renewal.

References

Ammons, E. (1994). Introduction. In E. Ammons, & A. White-Parks (Eds.), *Tricksterism in the Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*, vi-xiii. University Press of New England.

Asante, M. K., & Mazama, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412964623

Babcock-Abrahams, B. (1975). "A Tolerated Margin of Mess": The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, *11*(3), 147–186. https://doi.org/10.2307/3813932

Cai, B. (2008). A Trickster-Like Woman: Subversive Imagining and Narrating of Social Change. *Communication Studies*, *59*(4), 275–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970802257580

Carroll, M. P. (1981). Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective Upon an Old Problem. *American Ethnologist*, *8*(2), 301–313.

Dery, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822396765

Effiong, P. U. (2018). *The Dogon and the Sirius Star*. https://effiongp.msu.domains/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Dogon-Star.pdf

Faucheux, A., & Lavender III, I. (2018). Tricknology: Theorizing the Trickster in Afrofuturism. *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, *2*(2), 31–46.

Hyde, L. (1998). *Trickster Makes This World*. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Hynes, W. J., & Doty, W. G. (Eds.). (1993). *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. The University of Alabama Press.

Ingwersen, M. (2017). Towards a Trickster Science/fiction: Complexifying Boundaries with Neal Stephenson and Michel Serres. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, *42*(3), 255–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2017.1345148

Jurich, M. (1998). *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*. Greenwood Press.

Kilgore, D. W. D. (2008). New Reading Practices: Beyond the History We Know. In M. S. Barr (Ed.), *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's New-Wave Trajectory*. The Ohio State University Press.

Landay, L. (1998). *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The female Trickster in American Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lavender III, I. (2019). *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. The Ohio State University Press.

Lindow, S. (2017). Nnedi Okorafor: Exploring the Empire of Girls' Moral Development. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *28*(1), 46–69.

Marshall, E. Z. (2010). Anansi, Eshu, and Legba: Resistance and the West African Trickster. In R. Hörmann, & G. Mackenthun (Eds.), *Bonded Labour in the Cultural Contact Zone: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Slavery and its Discourse* (171–190). Waxmann.

Maurone, J. (2002). The Trickster Icon and Objectivism. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, 229–258.

Nnedi Okorafor [@Nnedi]. (2023, January 1). *I'd originally named the novella Sankofa…but the fact that real life slang for witchcraft in that* [Tweet], Twitter. https://x.com/Nnedi/status/1609583403510239233

Okorafor, N. (2014, January 15). African Science Fiction is Still Alien. Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2014/01/african-science-fiction-is-still-alien.html

Okorafor, N. (2019, October 19). Africanfuturism Defined. Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html?q=Afrofuturism

Okorafor, N. (2021). *Remote Control*. Tordotcom.

Scheub, H. (2012). *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Szmańko, K. (2008). *Invisibility in African American and Asian American Literature: A Comparative Study*. McFarland and Company, Inc.

Tannen, R. S. (2007). *The Female Trickster: The Mask that Reveals: Post-Jungian and Postmodern Psychological Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Culture*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315787718

Tatar, M. (Ed.). (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139381062

Toliver, S. R. (2021). *Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003159285

Turner, V. W. (Ed.). (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press.

Turner, V. W. (1979). *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology*. Concept Publishing Company.

Womack, Y. L. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books.

Wescott, J. (1962). The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster: Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, *32*(4), 336–354. https://doi.org/10.2307/1157438