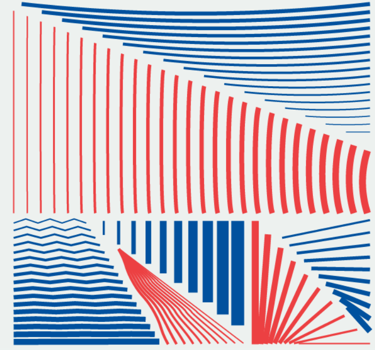
IN PROGRESS
A Graduate Journal
of North American Studies



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Making MTV the Disco: Representations of Transgressive Spaces in Laura Branigan's "Self Control" (1984)
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About Our Journal

In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies is a peer-reviewed online journal based at the English Department at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany. Launched in 2023, *In Progress* features academic work by graduate students in Anglophone literary, cultural, and media studies, focusing in particular (but not exclusively) on the field of North American Studies. To that end, we publish academic writing that demonstrates the excellence of graduate scholarship and strives to include diverse perspectives in our Academic Section. Beyond that, our journal provides a space for the documentation of student projects and other creative endeavors originating in and around Leibniz University's international master program North American Studies. In this capacity, the journal also publishes creative writing, reports of events organized by students, and other outcomes of seminars offered in the master program's "Independent Studies" module (such as video essays, podcast episodes, and book reviews) in our Independent Studies Section. In addition, the journal's Open Section is dedicated to a wide range of other themes, forms, and contents that graduate students produce specifically for each issue. *In Progress* is managed and run by a small core editorial team and produced with the active collaboration of graduate students who participate in the advanced seminar "Editing a Scholarly Journal." Seminar participants are involved in the blind peer review of the academic submissions and, together with the members of the core editorial team, they work on the editing and publication process. This also includes preparing the content of the Independent Studies Section for publication and the conceptual design and text production for the journal's Open Section. Our journal thus serves several purposes: It gives graduate students the opportunity to publish peer-reviewed articles, it introduces students to the work process involved in editing a journal, and it showcases projects that students developed at the English Department in Hannover. As a literal work *In Progress*, each issue's publication depends on the dedication, creativity, and cooperation of the people involved.

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Editorial Note

Simge Irmak Çinar & Jia Shen Lim

As we publish the third issue of *In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studie*s in the summer of 2024, we find ourselves celebrating our first anniversary with a contemplative eye on the very essence of progress that the title of our journal evokes. What does it mean to progress? Or what does progress entail? In the first sentence of his seminal essay "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1784), Immanuel Kant writes that "[e]nlightenment is mankind's exit from self-incurred immaturity" (58). Kant believed that a lack of maturity comes not from an inability to think, but from a reluctance or lack of determination to trust our own reasoning without relying on others for guidance, thus urging us to be brave enough to understand the world through our own perspectives. While the convenience of being guided by others is the path of least resistance, it ultimately hampers personal and societal development. Kant's emphasis on autonomy serves as a reminder that progress is often driven by those who dare to think and act independently. Michel Foucault revisits the same question two centuries later with a postmodern counterpoint in his 1984 essay "What is Enlightenment?" He proposes that enlightenment is less of a final state that is to be achieved, but more of a continuous process of critical self-examination, and self-improvement (305). Expanding on Kant's motto of enlightenment – "[s]apere audere!" (courage to know) – Foucault further asserts that true enlightenment, however, must be accompanied by the courage to challenge the status quo, to question the authorities or institutions that claim to guide us towards enlightenment (306). Enlightenment, and thus progress, becomes a collective endeavor that invites young and emerging scholars in American Studies to not only work within the fields of their understanding but push beyond them. This pursuit of transcending the limits of knowledge is a collective work, one that resonates with *In Progress*' commitment to continuous reassessment and broadening of scholarly thought, as presented in each issue's Academic Section, Independent Studies Section, and Open Section.

This issue's Academic Section begins with five articles that were selected through our journal's peer-review process. In these articles, our respective authors engage with varied research inquiries, offering us valuable insights on a range of different subjects: First, Niklas Zabe examines the music video of Laura Branigan's 1984 song "Self Control," arguing that it exploits the allure of transgression and appropriates queer aesthetics from the disco era to create a commercially appealing yet detached entertainment product. Then, Elisabeth Kashulskaya delves into the horror genre's capacity to articulate the inexpressible by exploring how author Carmen Maria Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" (2017) uses body horror to expose readers' biases and redefine female identity through the lens of abjection. In the third academic article, Leonie Amann explores another short story, Octavia Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987). Amann discusses the portrayal of disability and systemic oppression, highlighting how Butler's short story addresses the importance of community and intersectionality in overcoming discrimination. This is followed by Claudia Alea Parrondo's analysis of how affect theory and

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Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects can render complex environmental issues more understandable. Using Juliana Spahr's poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005/2011) as a case study, Alea Parrondo's article explores poetry's empathetic and decision-making impact on audiences. And finally, Alissa Lienhard's article analyzes Alice Oseman's novel "Loveless" (2020), examining how its use of metafiction and autofiction challenges traditional romance narratives and affirms queer joy, particularly in the context of aromantic and asexual representation. These articles, while diverse in subject matter, collectively interrogate themes of transgression, identity, disability, environmental empathy, and non-normative romance across various forms of media and literature.

Next, this issue's Independent Studies Section showcases some of the work produced for recent seminars that were taught in our North American Studies Master program's "Independent Studies" module. These seminars offer students the opportunity to pursue creative projects that point beyond conventional academic boundaries – as in Abigail Fagan's advanced seminar "Poetry Workshop," for instance, which took place over course of the 2023 summer term. The poetry published in this issue was written by students in the context of this workshop seminar and includes works by Shayan Rahmanian ("Shiraz in the heart" and "trilingual"), Lena Schröder ("The Bare Minimum"), Charlie Geitlinger ("Words Inherited I" and "Words Inherited II"), Sarah Willeford ("The Quilt" and "13 Ways"), Anne Dirks ("Bathroom Prayers"), Nientke Peters ("Pleasure in Pain"), and Mandana Vahebi ("On the Bar"). Composed in a number of styles, all of these poems highlight the power of poetry as a tool both for capturing and reflecting on experiences ranging from the everyday to the traumatic. Next, the Independent Studies Section features a selection of video essays originally produced for Kathleen Loock's seminar "Videographic Criticism," which was taught in the winter term of 2022/23. Each engaging with a different film, these video essays by Lida Shams-Mostofi ("Representing the Unrepresentable: Trauma in *Rocketman*"), Shirin Shokrollahi ("Trauma Unleashed"), Mandana Vahebi ("Traumatic Grief"), Sadjad Qolami ("A Reading in the Machine"), and Kerem Ak ("Benh Zeitlin Breaks the Ice"), couple insightful analyses of trauma, narrative structure, and visual storytelling with innovative ways of re-assembling audiovisual material in order to make their arguments – and thereby offer yet another example of the wide range of exciting creative work done by our program's Master students.

Finally, this issue's Open Section presents a comprehensive conference report on the German Association for American Studies' 33rd Annual Postgraduate Forum (PGF), which was held Leibniz University Hannover in early November 2023. Written by Holly Louise Anne Marie Fischer, Ioana-Marina Pantelici, and Simge Irmak Cinar, the report provides critical insights into the topics and discussions of last year's conference, offering readers an in-depth discussion of its primary themes and key moments. The Open Section further includes a video interview with conference organizers Lujain Youssef and Katerina Steffan from Leibniz University Hannover, who took the time to share their thoughts on their goals and aspirations, as well as on the numerous challenges they encountered in planning such a significant event. Afterwards, a second video interview with keynote speaker Anne Potjans from Humboldt University Berlin offers a glimpse into her research and the experience of being a keynote speaker. In line with the transdisciplinary and creative outlook of our journal, the Open Section furthermore includes an introductory video that captures the essence of conference experience, as well as some carefully crafted scrapbook pages that give an impression of how their creators, Holly Louise Anne Marie Fischer, Simge Irmak Cinar, and Ioana-Marina Pantelici, perceived the event.

As with previous issues, this number of *In Progress* is the product of a joint effort by the members of our editorial boards and the participants of the "Editing a Scholarly Journal"

Independent Studies seminar taught by Felix Brinker and Kathleen Loock during the 2023/24 winter term. In that seminar, a new cohort of student editors explored the basics of academic publishing, honed their editorial skills, and eventually went on to make crucial contributions to our journal's peer-review, proofreading, and editing process. Accordingly, we thank them for their indelible work: Without Simge Irnak Çinar, Holly Fischer, Adebola Oluwasanmi Ojo, Ioana-Marina Pantelici, and Mandana Vahebi, this issue would not have been possible. We are also immensely grateful to our general editors Felix Brinker and Kathleen Loock, whose guidance is instrumental to the journal's seamless operation. Finally, this issue's success also owes much to the dedication of our fellow associate editors, Sahar Al Kharsa, Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, and Marielle Tomasic. Additionally, we would like to extend a warm welcome to our new editorial board members Simge Irmak Çinar, Farima Fallah, Holly Fischer, Zeinabossadat Ali Zadeh Hosseini, and Zoe Lecht and thank them for joining our team. This recent expansion of our editorial board has already borne fruit, too: In addition to working on key tasks such as corresponding with authors, as well as the formatting and editing of articles, the new members of team have been a driving force behind the creation of our new Instagram page @inprogress_journal, which has been set up to engage with a wider audience. From this point on, the social media platform will serve as a space to share updates, announce Call for Papers, highlight contributions, and foster discussions that reflect the journal's dynamic and evolving nature – an exciting step forward in connecting readers and authors alike. As we celebrate all the work done for and the contributions to this issue, it becomes increasingly clear that the English Department at Leibniz University Hannover is at a crossroads of a transdisciplinary exchange. Moving forward, we remain dedicated to broadening our horizons and engaging in scholarly dialogue. Here is to more years of *progress*!

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Making MTV the Disco: Representations of Transgressive Spaces in Laura Branigan's "Self Control" (1984)

Niklas Zabe

Abstract
Often cast aside as a mere advertisement, a vapid illustration of sound, music video has received little scholarly attention to date. However, especially in the 1980s, the art form enamored entire generations of adolescents, who turned to it because it promised an escape into a less restrictive, more enticing life. This article reads the music video of Laura Branigan's 1984 pop song "Self Control" in the context of the simultaneous rise of social conservatism and the emerging medium of the music video. I argue that "Self Control" entraps its audience in the artificial, unattainable space music videos create in order to profit off the wish to transgress one's material surroundings. For this venture, the video appropriates queer, transgressive spaces, aesthetics, and conventions, which were fashioned in the late-1970s disco era. It then subjects disco spaces to two parallel processes. One is that of reworking and refashioning them to appease a mass audience and its tastemakers. The other is that of abstracting these spaces and severing their connection to the lived realities in which they originate. Together, these processes refashion the format of the music video into an industrial product that mediates pleasurable experiences such as free bodily expression and the temporary suspension of marginalization. I trace these developments by analyzing several parameters of film style, including mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing.

Keywords
Music Video – Popular Culture – Queer Studies – Space in Film – Disco

Transgressing in Video: An Orientation

"Oh, the night is my world," Laura Branigan contemplates in her 1984 hit song "Self Control." Casually transforming time into space, she discloses a rapacious desire to escape the daylight's dull monotony. In doing so, Branigan speaks of transgression, the crossing of boundaries, be it between day and night, the regular and the extraordinary, or the street and the disco. While this idea is already ingrained in the song itself, it truly germinates in the accompanying music video. Over the course of five minutes, Branigan moves through a variety of settings in her quest to elope from her unsatisfactory daytime routine. By no means random, the selection of places as well as the manner in which they are traversed by Branigan and the camera and assembled by the editing team, all

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contribute to how viewers experience them. In this article, I argue that the video re-fashions the explicitly queer, Black spaces of the disco era through emerging conventions in the domains of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing. As a result, queer transgressive spaces are propagated to the implied audience of white, suburban teenage girls as spaces of liberation from the social sanctioning of bodily expression and sexuality but are concurrently rendered abstract and unreachable. The physical disco space is deferred to the virtual medium of the music video, a medium that was proving to be commercially viable for the record industry and its new prodigy project: MTV.

To prepare my reading of the music video, I will first introduce the theoretical and historical context, including the disco era and its spatial and ideological innovations, the conservative climate regarding feminism in the 1980s, the founding of MTV, and the codes and conventions of the music video as a genre. I then lead into my close reading by sketching out the medial discourse that surrounded the release of "Self Control." Subsequently, I trace how the video distorts and alters the disco space on three filmic levels: setting, cinematography, and editing. Throughout, I connect these stylistic choices to my reflections on music video conventions, mediations of femininity, and the business mission of MTV.

The Post-Disco Era, the Rise of Anti-Feminism and the Rise of Music Television

The musical landscape of 1984, when "Self Control" entered the market, sits firmly in what Simon Reynolds calls the "post-disco era." This wording insinuates that the era was defined by a detachment from, but also the lingering presence of, disco. The term disco here refers both to a music genre popular during the 1970s and its primary space of consumption. Disco emerged as a subcultural movement in Black, Hispanic, and queer urban communities during the late 1960s. As a music genre it blends traditionally Black styles of music such as Motown, Funk, and Soul with elements of Latin or European classical music. Its popularity grew throughout the 1970s, becoming the go-to soundtrack for the all-American dancefloor in the second half of the decade (Ray 165).

A highly influential discussion of disco stems from British academic Richard Dyer. In his 1979 article "In Defence of Disco" he countered the popular sentiment of disco as a hedonist, superficial, and consumerist vehicle of late-stage capitalism. On the contrary, he detects transgressive dimensions in disco music on a musical and cultural level, particularly in its approach to eroticism and romanticism (410). Dyer sees the eroticism of disco as "whole-body eroticism," created by sexual lyrics, repetitively entrancing instrumentals and rhythms that provoke frenetic movement (411). Dyer's whole-body eroticism extends sexuality in music from the phallus to the entire body (411).[1] A second tenet is that of romanticism. According to Dyer, disco provides the musical backdrop for romantic moments of escape and transcendence. Thus, it offers an alternative to the everyday mundanity and attributes significance to the sphere of leisure as the primary site of personal meaning-making (413). Engaging with Dyer's article in 2014, Luis-Manuel Garcia expands on the spatial dimensions of transgression in the disco. For Garcia, disco dancefloors were enacted utopias: places where physical bodies could move differently than elsewhere, where community and joy could be experienced, and the concerns of the outside world could be put aside (1). Garcia proposes to read dancefloors as "interstitial […] and fleeting" sites with a fundamentally utopian outlook (3). This notion is paralleled by Nadine Hubbs' queer reading of Gloria Gaynor's disco

[1] For Dyer, an example of phallocentric music would be rock music.

song "I Will Survive." Hubbs compares the queer disco dancefloor to the medieval carnival, as both are a form of experimental space that temporarily suspends existing social systems, especially those of hierarchy and oppression (239-40). Dyer, Garcia, and Hubbs share the idea that the disco era created explicitly queer spaces and media which could suspend oppressive social relations for a limited time and experiment with innovative forms of expression.

Disco disappeared from the record shelves as quickly as it had conquered them. In 1979, the "Disco Sucks" movement formed, culminating most publicly in the Disco Demolition Night, an event during which visitors of a baseball game destroyed and burned copious quantities of disco records to proclaim the end of the genre's reign over popular music. According to Gillian Frank, the protesters directly criticized disco for its public celebration of queerness (279). The campaign succeeded in ceasing disco's domination of the music market, with disco sounds, images, and ideas mostly relinquished by 1981. However, the era's legacy remained in the popular music that followed.[2] In Frank's article, the demise of disco contributes to the emergence of a new conservatism in the early 1980s. Outlining the cultural politics of that decade, G. Thompson refers to what he calls the "culture wars" during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (30). He states that the "culture wars" were fought between a largely white, male supporter base for Reagan's conservative politics of anti-feminism, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-queer rights and the groups marginalized by them: women, queer people, Black Americans, ethnic minorities, among others. In her 1991 book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi pillories the anti-feminism of the 1980s. Her main claim is that feminism was often presented and perceived as a finished project that was supposedly beginning to cause women to be unhappy with their freedom (1-2). Faludi accuses the mass media of contributing heavily to this negative image (90). She traces how they adopted ideas of the new right and propagated them to the American public, cementing the image of the successful but unsatisfied businesswoman yearning to return to her family (91). Following Faludi, the 1980s created a hostile climate for messages of female emancipation.

However, there are also cultural moments that counterbalance Faludi's grim assessment. Early MTV, for example, provides instances of women's transgressions during the 1980s. Lisa Lewis first explored this from a scholarly perspective. In her 1992 article, she undertakes a semiotic analysis of several early female music videos, looking for visual signs of female address. She finds empowering female address most prominently in the usage of street space as a setting, a space perceived by her as hegemonically male (118). Through the manner in which they behave on the streets, dancing, walking with confidence, Cindy Lauper, Pat Benatar, and Tina Turner symbolically reclaim the street for women (118-20). Lewis clarifies, however, that these examples of empowering female address on MTV contrast a dominant sign system of adolescent male address (116). She closes by proposing a complex reading of MTV as a contested space where gender roles are both reinforced and questioned (126). This idea is expanded upon by Kenneth Shonk and Daniel Robert McClure. In their eyes, MTV offered a space for women to "transgress traditional representations and expectations" (172). They also situate early MTV in a period of transition between second- and third-wave feminism. Unlike second-wave feminism, women-fronted music videos in the 1980s framed issues such as sexual explicitness and longing for men as not inherently opposed to feminism (Shonk and McClure 178). The authors encounter further distinctly third-wave notions like a complex reconciliation of transgression and conformity, a working within structures instead of their demolition, and an acknowledgement of femininity as multifaceted (174). However, Shonk and McClure characterize the feminism of early MTV as "quiet," meaning not a call to direct action

[2] How exactly disco remained influential in early 1980s pop music is explored succinctly by Reynolds.

but rather a space to envision alternatives and possibilities (175). Both Lewis, and Shonk and McClure emphasize how female videos offered moments of gender-based transgression but remain situated within a larger patriarchal structure.

The MTV project is relevant for my discussion of "Self Control" on a broader level than just its mediation of femininity, however. MTV, which started broadcasting in 1981, is the vehicle that catapulted the music video medium to fame. Underlaying soundtracks with video material was in itself not a new concept (Korsgaard 18; Marks and Tannenbaum 6-7). Rather, the unique appeal of MTV consisted of its specific targeting of a white suburban teenage demographic, to which it sold not only songs, but also an idea of juvenile irreverence. Graham Thompson sees MTV as an attempt to reclaim lost ground and revitalize the industry from an economic crisis (127). To achieve this goal, record executives decided to target a yet unexplored audience: the American teenager (Thompson 58). Amanda Ann Klein narrows MTV's core demographic down to "white, suburban Americans of the ages twelve to thirty-four" (24), later adding middle-class to the mix (32). How this specific target audience was appealed to is explored by Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum in their account of young MTV. They outline an aesthetic of "quick cuts, celebrations of youth, shock value, impermanence and beauty" (2) that captivated teenagers and made MTV the "clubhouse" of that generation (2). Moreover, they observe a certain selection of features and traits characteristic to the early music video, including "aggressive directorship, contemporary editing and FX [special effects], sexuality, vivid colors, urgent movement, nonsensical juxtapositions, provocation, frolic" (8). What they provide here is essentially a first attempt at describing the genre conventions of music video that were coined during MTV's early years.

Scholars of various disciplines have likewise attended to the task of outlining codes and conventions that govern the music video as a genre. A common observation is that meaning in music video is created in a unique manner. Carol Vernallis emphasizes the narrative contrast between music video and literature or classical cinema: While some videos do feature such narrative elements, they mostly fail to create stories in the Aristotelian sense of a coherent string of events which causally relate to one another (Vernallis 3). Instead, Vernallis proposes that music videos perform a "consideration of a topic rather than an enactment of it" (3). Another characteristic trait of music videos is their foregrounding of formal elements. While classical cinema often attempts to obfuscate techniques such as editing and lighting, these are brought to the forefront by music video and often carry meaning by themselves (112). Vernallis also introduces an array of ideas and observations useful for working with spatial aspects of music videos. In her book *Experiencing Music Video* (2004), she discusses music video space as imbued with "possibility, autonomy and prowess" that contrast with everyday life's "patterns of repetition and stasis" (109). This space is erected through several filmic parameters. One of these is editing, meaning the selection and arrangement of shots (Bordwell et al. 217). Vernallis elaborates how music video shots are often conjoined by curious techniques, with cameras seemingly moving through solid structures, tiny openings, or screens (119). In this way, the camera exceeds human possibilities of moving through space and becomes oblivious to borders, impenetrable barriers, or size requirements. A further escalation of this is an ubiquitous use of the Kuleshov effect, a technique that arranges two shots filmed in separate locations in such a way that a spatial connection is implied (114).

Setting is also a parameter given special attention by Vernallis, although not under the umbrella of space, but place. Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan understands space as a more abstract concept than place (6). Places are results of a process of accustoming; they have familiarity. Conversely, places are also more universal and grounded in convention whereas space seems to be first and foremost grounded in experience. Accordingly, the influence of editing remains largely

spatial as it seems weird and unfamiliar. Setting, in contrast, works with places and prop configurations that are recognizable to the viewer. This effect, Vernallis explains, finds ample use by music video producers (82; 85). However, setting cannot only reproduce pre-existing places but meddle with perceptions of space as well (an aspect exemplified by the prop design in Branigan's "Self Control" in particular). As a last argument about space in music video, Vernallis expands on how music video space is centered on bodies in movement through the means of staging, lighting, and cinematography. In Vernallis's view of music videos, bodies and spaces become closely intertwined, suggesting that the detailed explorations of bodies can exalt sexuality and free viewers from bodily constraints, ultimately unleashing a liberating potential (98; 116).

Following Vernallis, music video space is a curious thing: It is antipodal to everyday space, because it upsets spatial logics, unlocks new possibilities, and never rests. It is centered on a body which rules over it. Spatial effects in Vernallis's argument are controlled either by technical conditions or directorial decisions. Taking into consideration the historical context, meaning the legacy of disco music and its own ideas about space, the hostile climate towards female emancipation and the profit-driven targeting of MTV provides a promising opportunity to contextualize and add an explanatory dimension to Vernallis's theories.

Reading "Self Control" between Robotic Commercialism and Emancipatory Eroticism

Among the female popstars of the 1980s, the name of Laura Branigan may not be the first to enter most people's minds. Regardless, at least two singles of hers, "Gloria" and "Self Control," have safely entered the 1980s pop canon. Branigan's music is hard to assign to a genre. While "Gloria," her first hit, has largely been seen as a late offspring of disco, other singles like "Solitaire," "Spanish Eddie," or "Self Control" are labelled synth-pop, post-disco, or Italo-disco. In the music industry magazine *Cash Box*, Peter Holden maintains that Branigan after "Gloria" was not marketed as a disco act, but still managed to sustain a following from her disco dawn. Dennis Hunt of the *Indianapolis News* agrees that Branigan is clearly an heir of a disco legacy, especially identifying similarities with disco diva Donna Summer. It seems evident that Branigan and her music were looked at through a post-disco lens. Branigan's reception in the press oscillated between disdainful shunning of her perceived dullness and awestruck appreciation of her strong vocals and broad appeal. Holden commends Branigan's appealing visuals, referring both to her looks and her music videos. He also describes her as the ideal artist for a record label because she was just distinctive enough to be recognizable without losing mainstream appeal. Hunt, more pejoratively, calls Branigan a "pet project of the label's chief executive." An even more scathing critique is formulated by Jim Sullivan for the *Boston Globe*, who likens Branigan to the *Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) in her persona's subservience to patriarchal desires. Praising figures such as Debbie Harry and Tina Turner, Sullivan finds Branigan and her music lifeless and dull.

The question of which image of femininity Branigan represents is especially pertinent to "Self Control." The music video for "Self Control" was only published in a censored version because it featured shots deemed too sexually explicit. Branigan herself reflects on this in an interview with *Entertainment Tonight*, claiming that her sensuality is not a conscious attempt to seduce, but rather an intrinsic quality she possesses ("Laura Branigan: [[cc]]" 0:17-31). Subsequently, she expresses displeasure that the "orgy-type scene" (0:54) could not be aired freely, questioning the double standards on physicality in culture (2:08-28). The interview also raises another novelty of "Self Control": The video was made by Hollywood director William Friedkin.

This, Branigan reports, was a creative process that felt more like shooting a movie than a simple montage of performance clips and enabled her to execute her own artistic vision (1:44-59).

These views of Branigan and "Self Control" – which include the disco legacy, the song's reception as explicitly commercial, its foregrounded sexuality, and its strong directorial voice – directly influence the representation of space in the music video. The young white female suburban target demographic of the video as well as the social climate of backlash against feminism also matter here, as "Self Control" presents to its audience transgressive spaces of escape. However, it does not locate these spaces in the sphere of attainability, but rather fictionalizes and obscures them, so that they remain within the music video. This process is present on three medial levels. First, through its settings, the video constructs a day-night cycle of escape but adorns it with props that remove it from a reality of experience and foreground its fictionality. Secondly, the cinematographic portrayal of Branigan, in tandem with her staging, constructs Branigan as emancipated and assertive but also sanctions her acts of transgression. Finally, editing is used to overcome spatial constraints, obscure spatial relations, and further signal the fictionality of the presented spaces.

"Tomorrow Never Comes:" Reading the Setting

The settings of "Self Control" essentially form a circle. Viewers follow Branigan from her bedroom to the street, into a club, down into its basement, through empty hallways back to her bedroom. Vernallis purports that music videos that feature a serial arrangement of settings ascribe mobility and, as a result, power to the performer (85). While the arrangement of settings in "Self Control" superficially conforms to this, other directorial choices complicate this notion, as the video establishes a more complex idea of spatial transgression by employing the technique of abstraction.

The settings in "Self Control" are places in Yi-Fu Tuan's sense, compositions familiar by convention. Branigan enters the camera's vision in her bedroom, lying on a chaise longue, wearing a nightgown (fig. 1). The bedroom as a place contains notions of the banal and the tantalizing, of sexuality and slumber. This room is adorned with flowers displayed in a fragile vase, a puppet clad in lace, curtains, a Persian rug, large bed side lights, and a naked man stretched out on the bed behind Branigan (0:03-20). Here, the director opts for props that evoke domesticity, fragility, and infantile innocence, such as fragrant flowers, dainty puppets, and delicate fabrics. Peeking through flowered curtains, Branigan then sees a silhouette of a city at nightfall (0:24-27) and decides to leave this room, taking to the mirror to dress up and paint her face.

Figure 1. Branigan in her chaise longue (0:09).

The next larger setting is a nighttime street complete with houses on the sides, traversing cars, and construction signs (fig. 2). Present as well are several passersby, including a gay couple, a group of young boys and a heterosexual couple with the veiled woman's legs enclosing the man's body. While the street is not presented as a space of male aggression, like the one Lewis detects in the music video for Pat Benatar's 1983 song "Love Is A Battlefield" (119), it carries an air of hostility and that puts a stop to the earlier visuals of flowery daintiness. The scene furthermore occupies a peripheral position as accompaniment to the song's bridge. As the bridge leads to the chorus, the street also leads somewhere else, another site that is presented as more important. The scene thus forms a first step of transgression away from the comfortable but uninspiring domestic environment, but its transitory nature is never questioned.

Figure 2: Branigan walking the nighttime street (1:10).

The first chorus is set to a bar scene, featuring gambling and dancing. On the dancefloor, Branigan is surrounded by various men in suits and ties, and the occasional woman dressed in red (fig. 3). This disco has little in common with the queer spaces of escape and transcendence established in the late 1970s. Instead of wearing colorful and flowing garments, these dancers seem as if not much separates them from their work-life selves. Branigan leaves this space quickly, too, and descends a stairway to the basement. The club is thereby no longer the destination but a steppingstone, just another place of transit.

Figure 3. Branigan during her short-lived dancefloor stint (1:53).

In the basement, as the first verse is repeated, Branigan enters the orgy responsible for the video undergoing censorship. The spacious room is furnished with bathtubs, scaffolding, and a floor covered in aluminum foil (fig. 4). The people active in the orgy-like event are wearing skintight suits of pastel colors: light blue, violet, beige. Their face masks are reminiscent of the Venetian carnival, one is playing the cello, and there is a basket of fresh apples. As Nadine Hubbs remarks, disco dancefloors functioned similarly to the carnivals of Catholic Europe, because they "collaps[e] […] and revers[e] […] social norms, hierarchies and castes" (239). In the orgy scene, castes and categories are also ousted by uniform dress and the obfuscation of faces. Apples, bathtubs, and instruments evoke splendor, indulgence, and abundance. Arms and legs are stretching out in all conceivable directions with no regard for straight lines, preserving Dyer's whole-body eroticism in positions where all body parts touch and interact. It appears as if the disco space of transgression has relocated from the dancefloor to the basement: the glittering disco ball has figuratively fallen down one storey and been dispersed throughout the room, transforming into an aluminum foil-like floor covering of a similarly reflective quality.

Figure 4. Carnivalesque contortions on aluminum foil (2:48).

Before returning to her bedroom, Branigan stumbles down a white hallway, where the orgy visitors are still around her. As she then re-enters her bedroom, these "creatures" have followed her, teleporting in and out of sight, undressing her, and finally assembling in the masked, muscled man she goes to bed with. As he leaves through the window and sunlight enters the chamber, Branigan switches off the light and the scene returns to its outset.

Figure 5. The plastic-sheeted hallway (2:03).

A common feature of all the settings (the bedroom, the street, the club, the basement) is that the prop work is rich enough to immerse viewers and unmistakably signify Branigan's place, yet sparse enough to set these places apart from their real-life inspirations. Branigan's bedroom is characterized by a lack of wallpaper and exposed bare concrete, haphazardly hidden by curtains hung at random places. Although there is a carpet, the floor is otherwise hidden underneath a white cloth, which extends to her make-up table. This table is surrounded by the same high and wide, empty grey walls. On the street, the unusual floor cover perseveres, now resembling a glossy dark tarpaulin instead of concrete (see fig. 2). The houses lining the street also do not seem made of brick or wood, but of two-dimensional painted cardboard. Even at the gambling table, almost unnoticeable because the image is populated by so many people, the background wall seems to be made of nothing but tarpaulin hung on a fence. The hallway through which Branigan follows the masked man is lined with thin plastic sheeting and supposedly leads to the orgy room, filled with scaffolding, aluminum foil, and various types of fabric (see fig. 5). The reason for these prop choices might be purely material: Given an empty and vacant studio, these coverings might have been the least costly and most effective solution to fashion these spaces into something recognizable. Indeed, Vernallis remarks how directors would select props from random storages expedited in good faith to the video set (106). The search for explanation notwithstanding, I am much more interested in the effect of these choices. Many of the props are borrowed from the domain of construction work, conveying a sense of unfinishedness. Especially sheets, tarpaulin, and foil also have a concealing effect, as their function is to hide and inhibit access. The spaces visible in the music video become but sketches of their inspirations, hasty constructions that signal their ephemeral quality to the viewer. Bedrooms, streets, and clubs become abstracted and uninhabitable; these prop choices work in tandem with the propulsive nature of the medium sound. These spaces do not obscure their fictionality but openly display their detachment from "real life."

"Live Among the Creatures of the Night:" Reading Branigan's Body in Space

To reiterate Susan Faludi's claim, the feminist movement was undergoing a period of crisis in the early 1980s. Simultaneously, the new medium of the MTV music video is regarded by some scholars as a platform where different conceptions of femininity were presented and mediated. I position the music video of "Self Control" among these mediations, as it toes the line between transgression and regression in its staging and cinematography, iconography, and reception.

First, I revert to my argument on the circular narrative of "Self Control," which positions the fictionalized Laura Branigan in a cycle of boring, uninspiring daytime and fulfilling, steamy nighttime. 'Daytime Branigan' is one that viewers barely encounter, except at the beginning of the music video. She is lounging in her chaise longue and holding a newspaper, which her eyes evade in favor of the air above. Her hand is moving from her private parts to her breasts, as the camera performs a rotation around her from a high angle. Static in comparison to the agile camera, and downgraded by its angle, she is almost relegated to the status of the furniture: an adornment, not an agent. Her absent gaze and slow movement, in convergence with the naked man in the background, however, allude to an act of transgression, of leaving this motionless shell for something more.[3] Shonk and McClure have characterized the multiplicity of feminisms on early

[3] Indeed, as the body is already in bed behind her, this might also temporally fall into the morning, closing the circle. The concrete temporality of these introductory shots remains somewhat mysterious. I understand this as deliberate, since circles, after all, never end.

MTV as a harbinger of the third wave. A key message of these new feminisms was that "a woman could be sexual but not […] sexualized […] independent from the patriarchy but also enamored by a man" (Shonk and McClure 174). 'Nighttime Branigan' is a quiet embodiment of this idea, as she decides to actively seek erotic pleasure. Taking the idea of transgression quite literally, she disobeys the one-way sign on the street, deliberately walking in the other direction (fig. 6), and crosses a red traffic light (at least this is alluded to). Time after time, she decides to follow the masked man, who was, according to Branigan herself, supposed to personify the night ("Laura Branigan: Interview," 3:37-49). Through the preceding context, her submission to the masked man (4:00) is presented as an act of her own volition and not as a surrender to the patriarchy.

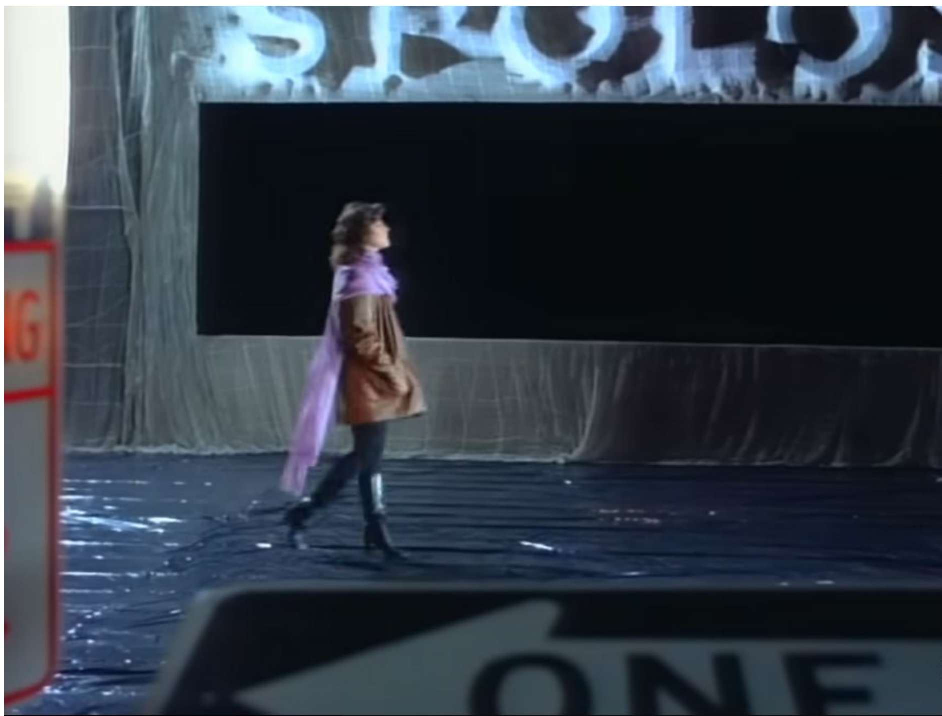

Figure 6. A sign points one way, Branigan walks another (1:13).

Transgression is also present on the level of lighting. The very first shot of "Self Control" shows a monochrome red screen, anticipating the repeated use of this color. When Branigan peeks through her curtains onto a silhouette of the cityscape, the black buildings are also lit by a red screen turning purple (fig. 7). This prompts Branigan to bite her finger in excitement and introduces the beguiling effect that red lighting has on her throughout the video. Similarly, once Branigan has applied her full make-up, the mirror lights redden and one of the ballet dancers appears to give a foretaste of the impending nighttime action (fig. 7). Still on the street, roadblocks are flashing red, and we see a red traffic light connoting the realm of the forbidden and prohibited. Unfazed by these signals of restriction, Branigan progresses to the club, lured by the masked figure she saw in the car, behind whom a red light glows (fig. 7). Although dressed in black and wearing a white mask, this figure remains entangled with the color red, as he is wearing red gloves on his hands, one of which he extends towards Branigan, asking her to descend to the floor of action (fig. 7). After spending the night with Branigan, the masked man disintegrates into sunlight. One last time, red light is being used when Branigan switches off her reddish lamp, symbolically ending the period of transgression (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Usage of red light and the color red throughout "Self Control" (0:24-4:42); collage by author.

Red light as a symbol of the dangerous and alluring, the erotic, and the otherworldly, was also used in disco videos, prominently in the music video of Sylvester's 1978 song "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" (fig. 8). Being used in such openly queer videos, red light does not only signify transgression, but more concretely the breaking of gender norms and the celebration of non-accepted forms of sexuality. Red light has been used to light queer spaces in the disco era, a tradition Branigan adopts in the "Self Control" music video.

Figure 8. Red lighting in Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel" (1:48).

While Laura Branigan certainly embodies a woman transgressing sexual norms and materializing her desire in the guise of night, this is not an unequivocally emancipatory portrayal, as her transgression is visually sanctioned in various ways. The most glaring moments of sanction are the two shots showcasing a puppet resembling Branigan in the bedroom. Between the beginning and ending of the video, the puppet undergoes a handful of meaningful changes. One of her eyelids is closed and a lash dangles from it, she has applied lipstick in a messy manner, and her neat hairdo has become tousled (fig. 9). This image not only contradicts a circular narrative of endless repetition, as it proves that the beginning and ending of the video are not identical, but also carries an almost moralistic undertone of lost innocence and order. Further examples of visual sanctioning are the shot in which the "creatures of the night" approach an apparently paralyzed Branigan in the hallway shot, which frames a frightened Branigan stumbling to escape arms reaching out to her. These scenes insinuate that "the night" might have been too much for Branigan, that she might come to regret her act of transgression. This is reminiscent of nostalgic sentiments for a time "before feminism," which Susan Faludi posits as symptomatic of the 1980s.

Figure 9. The bedroom puppet at 0:07 and 4:56.

I want to contrast this reading, which locates "Self Control" closer to the backlash described by Faludi, with a queer reading of the video provided by architectural scholar and techno DJ Simona Castricum. Castricum's reading emphasizes how the video, for her, clearly evokes the queer nightclubs of her early adulthood, and through its pungent eroticism constructs "liminal spaces of permission, denial, shame and pleasure" (195). Although she laments the effects of censorship, the video still sufficed to transport a queer message and provide inspiration to "reject the control of the heteronormative and cisnormative world, […] to transgress external controls of sexuality and gender" (195). Reconsidering the *Stepford Wives* comparison by Sullivan, it appears that the video does not only carry text-intrinsic contradictions of enaction and penalty towards gender and sexuality-based transgression but has also prompted them in its reception.

"In the forest of my dreams": Reading Editing in "Self Control"

Another parameter of film form foregrounded in "Self Control" is editing. The transitions between shots use innovative editing techniques – in particular, dissolves and the Kuleshov effect – which augment the logics of space inscribed into the video. The process of disorientation, already subliminally present in the realms of mise-en-scène and staging, is thus expanded to another parameter of the music video format.

Shots in "Self Control" are joined in a variety of ways.[4] Most shots that relate to each other are joined by simple cuts, which means one image abruptly substitutes the next. When a new section is introduced, more elaborate techniques are used. The timing of such techniques here largely mirrors the spatial structure of the video as they mostly signal a change of location. The transition from bedroom to street, for instance, is executed through a dissolve in which the substitution of an image with another one occurs gradually. This impression of gradual change is heightened by the presence of the street in the last bedroom shot, through the window behind Branigan's leg (0:50-54). It is almost as if the camera simply moved through the window, disregarding the height, and slowly descended. In addition, it also implies spatial continuity during a sequence whose parts were, in all likelihood, filmed on two distinct sets. Spatial limitations imposed on bodies by the physical world, such as the near impossibility to jump out of windows on higher storeys and remain

[4] The classification used here is taken from Bordwell et al. (217).

unscathed, are insignificant to the omnipotent camera and, for a moment, the viewing body as well. Here, editing empowers the viewer spatially.

The next spatial transition is between the street and the bar and happens via a red hand as encountered at a traffic light (fig. 10). The hand shape first substitutes the street shot by blinking, then fades out to reveal the billiard table setting. Contrary to the home-street transition, no spatial relation is established. Viewers remain unaware of how Branigan moved from the street to the bar. The significance of the red hand exceeds simply symbolizing nightly transgression. As an editing technique, it obscures how the transgression happens on an orientational level. Questions like where Branigan goes to transgress, how she enters the bar, or where this bar is located are not answered in the video. In another instance of changing location, the transition between the dark hallway and the stairway is shown by Branigan touching the door with both hands. Instead of opening the door, the shot collapses and falls, giving way to the next shot. This combination of staging and editing simulates that Branigan's manual power collapsed the film screen. The technique suspends the illusion of three-dimensionality and emphasizes how all video material remains two-dimensional. It also allows the camera to permeate the door without opening it. Here we encounter another dimension of music video editing, which, as Vernallis has reminded us, manipulates space beyond our physical capabilities. Through the use of these transitions, the video is structured and empowers viewers spatially while also exacerbating orientation and suspending bodily spatial limitations.

Figure 10. Transition via a red stoplight (1:35-38).

However, editing is not only relevant to the mediation of space in these larger transitions. In the cuts between shots set in the same environment, the video makers amply use the Kuleshov effect. For instance, this effect is repeated several times when Branigan spots the masked man: We see multiple shots of the man and Branigan staring into the camera and conclude they are looking at each other (e.g., 1:58-2:01, 2:37-44, 3:14-21). As viewers, we become encircled by the two figures and intrude into their intimate communication through glances. In "Self Control," the Kuleshov effect thus establishes oppositions and communicates sexual tension, fear, enticement and temptation.

Finally, editing in "Self Control" is also used to join two shots to create the illusion that they are one. Examples of this technique include the figure that appears in the mirror as Branigan applies her makeup (fig. 7), the hallway where the masked man vanishes (2:10-12), Branigan disappearing in the white hallway (3:32), and the final departure of the masked man at the first sunlight (fig. 11). In another step that removes the video from an inhabitable reality, viewers are confronted with a space that can be left by dissolvement, which is at once liberating but also glaringly fictional.

Figure 11. The masked man vanishes into the sunlight (4:23).

The editing techniques employed by "Self Control" fashion the spaces of the video as liberating and transgressive because they exceed the spatial possibilities of the real world and enact alternate ways of moving and relating objects to one another. Simultaneously, however, the same techniques also relegate the video's spaces to the domain of the fictional, emphasizing their constructed nature and unattainability. As a result, the images joined in Branigan's music video do not provide a roadmap to transgressive spaces, but merely point to themselves.

Conclusion

My reading of "Self Control" shows how fragmented the representation of transgressive spaces grew over the course of MTV's early years. "Self Control" was released when MTV had been on air for two years, by an artist whom critics have repeatedly characterized, in praise and scrutiny, as a commercial darling and a pet project of record executives. MTV's target audience were young adults and one of the channel's primary assets, according to Marks and Tannenbaum, was the celebration of youth and impermanence. MTV sold this not to the urban youth, who had ample opportunity to access transgressive spaces like nightclubs, but to the white, middle-class teenagers in suburban America. Accordingly, the video warps queer transgression to fit a female, white middle-class protagonist and portrays female sexuality ambiguously to both appease conservative voices and entice suburban teenage girls. The video also removes spaces of transgression from accessible physical space and transposes them to a television environment in which they generate profit for the booming channel. This forms part of the mission to "make it [MTV] their [the teenagers'] clubhouse" (Marks and Tannenbaum 2). Viewed against background, Branigan's "Self Control" video, and others like it, present MTV as a privileged place to experience the enjoyment of demarginalization, corporeal freedom, and synchronized escape from the confinements of the work-home dichotomy.

Little is left of the lavish extravagance of queer disco spaces in "Self Control." These spaces, which Luis-Manuel Garcia calls "a performative enactment of a world better than this one" (1) and Nadine Hubbs thinks can temporarily "collaps[e] … and revers[e] … social norms, hierarchies and castes" (239), have been distorted and burdened with commercial incentive. Nevertheless, song

and video cannot be separated from the disco tradition, considering how Laura Branigan was commonly read as a post-disco starlet, likened most frequently to Donna Summer. This transformation of space coincides (not coincidentally) with an increase of conservatism and backlash towards progressive ideas, among them the backlash against feminism outlined by Faludi and exemplified by the 'Disco Sucks' movement, which explicitly shunned disco for its queer undertones. The erasure of explicit queerness as well as the ambiguous portrayal of female sexuality in "Self Control" thus also protect the video from public scrutiny. Nevertheless, queer notions of transgression still linger in the video in brief moments and fleeting symbols, as Castricum has argued.

"Self Control" is firmly situated in the processes of incorporation of disco spaces into the music industry of the 1980s and the manifestation of generic conventions. Both these processes cannot, as is evident from the music video, be regarded as independent of each other. Rather, they conditioned and influenced each other. Many of the music video's early conventions, such as a focus on form, a lack of conclusive narrative, the disregard for the spatial logics of our physical reality and the liberatory function of music video space are also visible in "Self Control." I believe that the connection I established to disco spaces and to the social, economic, and cultural position that MTV occupied in the social, economic, and cultural climate of the 1980s provides a promising starting point for explaining the emergence of these specific conventions.

Writing about the disco era of the 1970s in the wake of the 2020s disco renaissance, it seems evident that, although the music video genre has undergone immense transformations, ideas that were relevant to "Self Control" continue to linger today. The visual and sonic language of the disco era seems to remain an evocative tool which offers viewers experiences of transgression. My reading of "Self Control" has provided insight into how these representations can carry challenging baggage: They can erase queer imprints, concede to conservative criticism, and exploit utopian spaces of hedonism for a capitalist venture. Nonetheless, videos such as Branigan's "Self Control" construct spaces for young audiences, including queer ones, to envision ways to move and relocate their bodies beyond the narrow possibilities of suburban environments – in the early 1980s and, seemingly, to this day.

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Real Women Are Too Real: Female Character Constructions in Carmen Maria Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies"

Elisabeth Kashulskaya

Abstract
Horror contains all the necessary ingredients for an enticing read: its startling, oftentimes unprecedented elements and imagery manage to produce suspense within a fixed framework that ensures separation between a fictional tormented protagonist and real-life readers. Carmen Maria Machado focuses on yet another strength of the genre, namely its power to give voice to the unspeakable. She reclaims the monstrous female and redefines her as the potent 'Other.' Through the lens of Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, this paper illustrates how body horror in Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" can be elevated to a functional literary instrument that exposes a readership's biases towards female realities. Machado's female characters defy categorization in terms of heteropatriarchal laws and willingly choose existence in a liminal space where ambiguity reigns. By executing their roles as abjects, Machado's female cast perpetually challenges readers to perceive and re-evaluate their seemingly one-dimensional characters in all their contradictory facets. Ultimately, abject female characters act as signposts, pointing at underlying gaps and fractures in male-oriented societies.

Keywords
Abjection – Body Horror – Female Subjectivity – Feminism – Julia Kristeva

Introduction
Horror fiction allows for a curious introspection into the duality of human nature: while every subgenre of horror aims at inciting 'negative' emotions such as shock, fear, or disgust, it continues to have an odd magnetic appeal for its readership (cf. Rapoport 619). Horror excites curiosity and desire, takes the readers' attention hostage and forces them to endure the same torment that the literary characters experience by proxy. When a fictional human body is massacred in graphic detail, one cannot help but show an emotional response. Thus, it is hardly surprising that women, whose bodies have historically been used as political canvasses for male projection, would continue to play a central role in the body horror subgenre (cf. 632). To dismiss the "monstrous female" or the feminine as incessantly fragile, submissive or passive, however, would be a gross fallacy (622). It is certainly true that the archetype of male-subject-oppressor and female-object-victim is more likely to meet public expectations (cf. Stopenski 2). Body horror, on the other hand, deliberately constructs women as the 'Other' (cf. Rapoport 622). Superficially, women are defined as the 'lesser'

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pendant to male characters. Only at second glance it becomes evident that the Other carries a menacing radiance precisely because of its deviant, unpredictable essence. The Other defies categorization into generic schemata. According to Melanie Rapoport, body horror fiction acts on the premise of "supernaturalizing women's bodies in order to naturalize them" (619). The argument goes that the supernatural elements help to achieve "such visceral discomfort" that previous stigmas and taboos will eventually lose their power (622). The reality of menstruation suddenly appears 'ordinary' in comparison to carnage and aliens bursting from corpses or human beings, for that matter, are tenfold more terrifying than parturition.

Nevertheless, all theories include grey areas. Stopenski rightly points out that body horror "creates a dichotomous space of both feminism and anti-feminism, agency and oppression" (1). Carmen Maria Machado, too, is very much aware of this antagonistic quality. In her short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, she explores women's lives, bodies, identities, and possibilities in alternate universes that are dangerously akin to the 'real' world. As the title already suggests, Machado deliberately experiments with ambiguity to represent female subjectivity. Female sexual identity can coincidentally be both "a source of joy" or a transactional commodity in her world (Więckowska 83). Her fifth short story "Real Women Have Bodies" has received relatively little attention within academic literary discourse although it poignantly illustrates how to exploit the horror genre to depict issues concerning universalistic aspirations of modern feminism as well as the ongoing subtle exercise of power by heteronormative and patriarchal systems. "Real Women Have Bodies" narrates the life of an unnamed protagonist in her mid-twenties who struggles to find her place in the world amidst a mysterious epidemic that causes women to dematerialize into nothingness. Stuck in a dead-end job, she dares to explore her sexual identity with her co-worker Petra, who eventually falls victim to the fading. Reading between the lines, one is struck by the evident male ridicule of the disappearing women and even more so by the apparent female disinterest in losing their colleagues, relatives, and friends. "[S]ee-through and glowing faintly, like afterthoughts," the ghostly women are far from being dead; however, their transcendental state impedes viable communication (Machado 134).

I argue that Machado reclaims and subverts archaic tropes from the body horror genre in favor of directing the readers' attention to female realities and womanhood. By implementing Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection at various levels in her short story, taboos about women's body politics, sexualities, and identities are questioned and partially abnegated. Paradoxically, female characters losing their voices, physically as well as metaphorically, here give rise to spaces for open discussion about previously silenced, censored, or excluded topics about women. Methodologically, I will combine insights from the body horror genre as well as Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical concept of abjection to explain their categories, potentials, and limits for (anti)feminist writing. The main part will be split into two analytical strands: firstly, a thorough examination of mother-daughter relationships, followed by an analysis of different corporeal states that the female characters undergo. Ultimately, I aim to delineate how Machado's successful use of defamiliarization techniques leads to the construction of complex, subjective female identities.

Body Horror Politics and Julia Kristeva's Concept of 'Abjection'

The subgenre of body horror is considered to be "one of the loosest and most ill-defined terms in gothic and literary horror studies" (Rapoport 620). Generally, as the name already suggests, any literary text that features explicit portrayals of abnormal, distorted, attacked, or heavily violated bodily states falls under the category of body horror (cf. Cruz 161). *The Mammoth Book of Body Horror*

proposes a taxonomy according to which "transformation, mutation and contagion" of the human body produces fear within the reader (Rapoport 620). Across all theories, corporal transformations go hand in hand with changes in bodily functions (cf. Cruz 161). Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz is adamant that the gradual obliteration of the human body triggers terror; the final outcome, death, appears less uncanny than the actual process of destruction or decomposition (cf. 161). During this dematerialization process, the body is often "distanced and defamiliarized into an inhuman condition" (Edwards and Graulund 58). Conversely, inhumanity creates discomfort for it confounds existent knowledge repositories and thought patterns (cf. Stopenski 2). The monstrous body repels accurate classification, which, in turn, disturbs the individual who constantly seeks to categorize their world. Apart from "alterations, corruptions, erosions or de/evolutions from within," David Cronenberg introduces yet another facet of body horror (Edwards and Graulund 56). While body transformations of individuals occur on a micro-level, abstract macrosystems such as "commoditization, technoscience or hegemony" can indirectly influence corporeality, too (57). Female body horror in particular plays on Cronenberg's latter notion of horror. Instead of generating fear through an unexpected, monstrous novum, it reveals deep-rooted anxieties through showing the mundane in a slightly alienating light (cf. Crane 3). Female discrimination, devaluation, and erasure, for instance, are well-known concerns. In the main part of this article, an analysis of Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" will demonstrate how the amplified representation of those same issues works as the main source of fear. After all, there is a divide between scholars to which extent female body horror can work to empower women. Stopenski purports that body horror promotes "Otheredness," which leaves the female body "objectified and spectacularized," only further reinforcing and endorsing biases towards deviant women (3). In contrast to Stopenski's definition that renders female bodies and characters as passive victims, Cruz is convinced that "females tend to represent the destructive sexual other, whereas males stand by watching" (165). While 'Otheredness' consigns a woman's monstrous body to a state of silent suffering and condemnation, then, 'Otherness' becomes a productive means of protest, as it is willfully chosen rather than being enforced by others. For the purpose of this article, I will consciously oscillate between both perspectives because I believe that they are not necessarily contradictive, but complementary.

Julia Kristeva's essay *Powers of Horror* provides a helpful post-structuralist concept to deconstruct the mechanisms behind body horror. Her theory derives from the psychoanalytical notion of the separation between a child and the pre-Oedipal mother (cf. Ross 149). Thus, horror and aversion constitute a 'necessary' reaction to escape the mother's firm grasp on one's identity (cf. Ross 149). Only then will the child leave behind its state of a desired object and eventually become a subject, enabled to integrate itself into the 'symbolic order' – represented by the father – while the mother remains an abject figure (cf. Creed 68). Likewise, this view can be made feasible for literary studies. Just as the child fears the abject or "the state of being cast off," an audience will feel similarly about a monstrous 'Other' that is destined to linger on the fringes of society as an outcast (Stopenski 2). Horror, Kristeva argues, stems from the abject's implied ambiguity (cf. 9). While the subject and the object delineate precise borders of identity, the abject is the place "where meaning collapses," pointing to the system's limits as well as its potential incompleteness as a whole (Kristeva 2). Furthermore, just as the mother continues to exist alongside her subject-child, the abject poses a continuing threat to the "unity of the subject" (Ross 149). The abject's mere existence is a perpetual reminder of the fragility of the allegedly stable symbolic order as well as its categories, rules, and laws (cf. Creed 74). Hence, the corpse is a prototypical example of abjection (cf. Kristeva 3). It reveals the materiality of the human body and diffuses life, health, and corporeal barriers with

death, decay, and leaking bodily fluids (cf. Ross 149). Finally, inside and outside become indistinguishable. Both "unapproachable and intimate," the abject hardly triggers a psychic response because of its lack of cleanliness (Kristeva 6). Rather, it is the abject's subliminal power to disrupt stability and clarity that unnerves an audience, for it has to face its own impermanence. In "Real Women Have Bodies," horror elements and abjection run in parallel. Despite their primary aim to unsettle readers, their potential for critical social commentary will become apparent in examining the female characters within the short story.

Queer, Sexually Active Women in "Real Woman Have Bodies"

In the very first sentence, the unnamed narrator in "Real Women Have Bodies" positions herself as an abject figure: "I used to think my place of employment, Glam, looked like the view from inside a casket" (Machado 125). She equates the cooperate world with death but simultaneously constructs herself as an un-dead corpse inhabiting this very casket. Working at a dress shop, the paragon of a female gendered space, quite literally eliminates the possibilities of achieving her dreams and aspirations (cf. Nakhal 17). Being an abject, she has no self-agency nor power to change her situation. Gizzy, her superior who manages the store, enunciates her thoughts on the gloomy workplace atmosphere by adding the sarcastic comment that "[t]he black [of the walls] […] reminds us that we are mortal and youth is fleeting," which echoes Kristeva's idea of abjection (Machado 125). The whole working environment creates a presence of signified death, in which the narrator is forced to uphold a 'professional' persona in exchange for 'actual' personhood. Moreover, the shop manager's philosophy discloses sexist social norms ingrained in the business: female customers whose 'favorite' leisure activity is shopping for clothes, to indulge in their materialistic and consumption-oriented desires, are, of course, also obsessed with their superficial appearance. Consequently, youth, the main selling point to attract male suitors, becomes a valuable good that must be protected, even against the odds of natural aging. Although the narrator initially appears to follow femininity conventions, the neat heteronormative gender dichotomy is soon disrupted by Petra's introduction.

Whereas Chris and Casey, two strongly opinionated staff members from the neighboring photo studio, feel confident in doting on and asserting their verbal dominance over female customers at Glam, they "leave Petra alone [because] she always wears a baseball cap over her short brown hair and tightly laced combat boots" (Machado 127). Petra's style of clothing challenges traditional feminine gender expectations. Her lack of femininity repudiates categorization as an object of desire for the male gaze. From a patriarchal viewpoint, she radiates a monstrous aura because she evades fixed gender roles. However, Machado's generic painting of a butch lesbian is by no means discriminatory. If anything, it cleverly exploits societal stereotypes about lesbians by raising certain expectations and ultimately flouting them. Etymologically, the name "Petra" derives from the Greek word "petros" which translates to "stone" or "rock" (cf. Campbell 304). Her solid name, coupled with a dominant personality and openly displayed queer identity, leads the readership to believe that she will act as the 'strong male counterpart' to the unnamed narrator. In the end, Petra will actually turn out to be the vulnerable party. Her attempts at 'curing' her advancing disappearance are coincidentally reminiscent of advice from social media channels that purportedly support 'healthy' diets and a positive body image. At some point, Petra becomes obsessive about her incorporeality to the extent of developing an eating disorder due to her extreme diet:

> She reads rumors on the Internet about how you can slow fading. One message board talks about a high-iron diet, so she steams enough spinach to feed a large family and chews on it wordlessly […] Petra has taken to treating every meal as her last, so she peels the skins off the pieces of chicken and chews on them with her eyes closed, and then on the meat itself, and then she sucks hard on every bone before throwing it off into the trees. (Machado 143)

'Eating less' is considered to be 'appropriate' behavior for women to conform to a certain beauty standard in patriarchal terms and Petra's obsession with her dietary and exercise schedule move her closer to 'traditional' gender norms than the readers initially would have expected from her. This plot twist encourages readers to reflect upon their own biased notions as well as socially acquired patterns of thinking about queerness.

In contrast, the unnamed narrator strays increasingly further from heteropatriarchy throughout the narrative. During intercourse with Petra, she quite literally reaches her peak of defiance as she "come[s] fast and hard, like a bottle breaking against a brick wall. Like I've been waiting for permission" (Machado 133). Sex between women breaches multiple taboos apparent in phallocentric ideology. On the one hand, it evokes the myth of the "vagina dentata," a woman whose unrestrained sexuality renders her as "devouring, enigmatic, dissembling, and castrating for men" (Ross 151). Additionally, homosexual intercourse loses its reproductive function. Pregnancy becomes a virtually impossible event which allows both parties to focus on female satisfaction, instead of being forced to remain in a passive state of endurance and to cater to male needs (cf. Rapoport 626). Hence, men become superfluous for procreation. Castration, then, refers to choice deprivation, not physical annihilation. A lesbian couple excludes men from having sex with either of the two women. If insemination and childbearing can no longer be controlled by a male partner, patriarchy will have to face the serious danger of losing its potential progeny, and, thus, its overall existence. Lastly, sexual difference defies confinement to the pregnant, maternal body that merely serves as an incubator. Even though Petra and the narrator successfully escape from male objectification, they have to isolate themselves from society entirely to pursue their same-sex relationship. The narrator alternates between the motel, the condiment factory, the outdoors, and nightlife venues and thus remains abjected from public life. Apart from queer women, mothers inhabit an equally liminal space in the short story.

Absent, Scheming Mothers

Kristeva's theory of abjection defines mothers as inherently abject. They are opposites to the patriarchal symbolic order and represent a constant threat to the subject. Petra's mother elicits an odd sense of uncomfortableness when first introduced to the narrator: "a large woman in a peach nightgown is using a sewing machine behind the counter. She looks like a melting ice cream, cone – loose. Long hair spills off her head and disappears behind her back" (Machado 131). She wears a domestic, but 'scandalous' piece of clothing in the lobby of the motel which signals self-confidence and overtly displaying her femininity. The color peach, her long hair, and her handiwork create an alluring image of a dutiful, placid housewife. Furthermore, her enactment is evocative of weaving and spinning mythical women, such as Penelope, Philomela, Arachne or the Moirai, who functioned as representatives of "classical feminine virtues such as modesty, chastity, and obedience" in Greek society (Shoichet 23). Stitching, weaving, and spinning all belong to the sphere of textile production. It is no coincidence that the word "texere" means both "to weave" and "to

compose" and frequently occur as collocations with "plot" and "deception" (Ferber 230). Besides, textile itself can operate as a universal language across time and thus immortalize its creator. In this vein, the portrayal of Petra's mother transpires to be a deceiving one. While she appears 'harmless' in pursuing her work apathetically, the narrator learns that she is processing fading women into dresses in a cold-blooded manner. Petra tries to smoothen the circumstances by adding that the women 'go under the needle' voluntarily, but she also concedes that "those dresses do so well – they sell more than anything my mother has ever made before. It's like people want them like that, even if they don't realize it" (Machado 135). It becomes apparent that the dress-girls' wish to be incorporated into the needlework reflects a more general desire of society to exercise control over deviant women. Petra's mother is but an accomplice in this 'fashionable' cycle of oppression. Driven by materialistic thinking, she governs the fate of a nebulous amount of women's lives, sacrificing them for personal gain. In accordance with Kristeva, Petra's mother poses a serious existential threat as she wields the power to bereave her daughter of her identity, as well. She is shown to be entranced in her work, barely responding to Petra's attempts at conversation. Along with her stiff, repetitive answers, she grows to resemble an automaton – yet another cog in the massive wheel of patriarchy (cf. Machado 132). Albeit her limiting social environment, Petra's mother manages to disaffiliate herself from total male domination. Through the act of stitching, she "weaves her own narrative rather than merely being a thread in someone else's" (Shoichet 32). After all, she remains an ambiguous figure, since her commodified human-dress compositions create a firm space where the fading women can continue to live on, while also being permanently bound to the very system that denies their existence.

Gizzy is yet another conflicting mother figure. She supervises Glam and appears to be a feminist role model at first glance. Owning a successful dress business notwithstanding, her co-worker Natalie dismantles her anxieties and 'true' intentions: "Gizzy runs this store because she's pining after her lost youth" (Machado 125). What could first be taken as enviousness, is later on partly confirmed by the narrator who observes that "her face is strangely youthful and unlined […]. She paints her mouth matte peach every day, so evenly and cleanly […]. I think her eyeliner is tattooed on her lids" (125). Although Gizzy is the same age as the narrator's mother, she manages to withstand ageist beauty norms. But, the obsession with beauty standards and the struggle to accept her own aging body, make Gizzy quite the opposite of an emancipated woman. In fact, it underscores how deeply engrossed Gizzy/she actually is in patriarchal ideology. Between the life stages of youthfulness and old age, her body undergoes multiple different alterations, constantly reminding her of her unavoidable physical degeneration and potential death. She repeatedly attempts to re-establish her status as a subject or at least a desirable object for the male gaze. In a patriarchal culture, a "woman's value is entirely bound up with her sexual attractiveness," so if she fails to conform to beauty standards, she will virtually fade from the heterosexual courtship matrix (Robbins 304). Under these circumstances, every other younger woman becomes a benchmark, and, thus, a potential adversary. When the narrator confronts Gizzy about her missing daughter, she "turns her face away and finishes writing" (Machado 138). Admittedly, her avoidant behavior could act as a barrier to mask the sorrow of losing her daughter to an inexplicable illness that could affect her, too. However, considering how Gizzy consciously collaborates with Petra's mother who exchanges women's identities for financial profit, it is reasonable to assume that she likewise partakes in the cycle of female exploitation. If Petra's mother aids commodification, Gizzy ensures a successful transaction. At length, the narrator realizes what type of business Gizzy actually runs: "I've seen the way she runs her hands over the dresses, the way her fingers linger on people's skin. Her daughter is gone like the others, and there isn't anything she can do about it" (126). Gizzy's

menacing aura is a result of her ignorance towards "borders, positions, [or] rules" (Kristeva 4). Human skin represents the ultimate boundary that separates the inside from the outside. Her prolonged human touch disregards politeness etiquette and threatens to invade the bodies of her customers. She embodies the abject figure that provokes abjection within others. Similar to Petra's mother, Gizzy is afraid of leaving the symbolic order behind because it provides her with financial security – even at the cost of her own daughter's life. The mother figures in "Real Women Have Bodies" vividly demonstrate the complexity of patriarchal systems. If it were just male members of society that oppressed women via unfounded privileges, women could 'just collectively resist' this injustice. However, Petra's mother and Gizzy show how the vicious cycle of victimization and oppression can be upheld through internalized sexism. Women affected by collaborators of the patriarchy, in turn, use a multitude of strategies to regain self-agency.

Self-Mutilating Dress-Women

Gender performance and social norms feature prominently in the short story. At the center of the premise lies the inexplicable disappearance of all kinds of women regardless of their sociodemographic features (cf. Campbell 312). As there is no definitive answer for the cause of fading, it implies that all female individuals are susceptible to the same risk. Simultaneously, all female characters are constantly exposed to the judging eye of society. This becomes apparent when a teenage customer tries on prom dresses at Glam, choosing a slightly more 'risqué' model and then suddenly announcing that she does not "want to get a reputation" (Machado 126). Fashion, outer appearance, and beauty standards play a crucial role in the lives of the female characters. They are keenly aware of resulting social sanctions should they decide to disrupt the heteronormative order. Therefore, they abide to modest, feminine clothing choices in order to remain a part of society.

The ghostly dress-women serve as a grotesque exaggeration of this very problem. In the back room of the motel, the unnamed narrator encounters the nearly incorporeal women for the first time. Their excessive preoccupation with their own bodies already suggests dissatisfaction, low self-esteem as well as signs of body dysmorphia. Although the dehumanization project of Petra's mother includes stitching the girls' skin into the fabric of the prom dresses, the affected women remain eerily silent throughout the ordeal (cf. Machado 134). Their hybridization with prom dresses falls into the 'typical' category of transformation, but what heightens the body horror is the fact that the female body is not at the mercy of attacks, violations and pain by external forces. Instead, the dress-women voluntarily choose to inflict self-mutilation upon themselves. Definitions of body horror use a passive voice to underline the passiveness of metamorphosis. In this case, however, body alteration is an act of free will. Again, special emphasis is put on skin. The conflation of skin and textile, woman and dress, subject and object, gives rise to the abject. By merging the two together, neatly defined borders are transgressed. The skin that was meant to "contain and protect the homely site of identity" detaches from its host. Readers are left bewildered as to whether the consciousness of the women is transferred to the object or rather liberated, inhabiting a sacrosanct space beyond the reaches of human imagination (Edwards and Graulund 59).

Indeed, the dress-women's actions can be described as ambiguous at best. One could argue that as consumers, they ultimately decide to become consumed goods, and, thus, a literal part of the capitalist machinery. According to Campbell, prom dresses are "the epitome, arguably, of superficiality, hypersexualization and heteronormativity" (306). Consequently, self-mutilation helps to approximate oneself to the impossible societal ideal of 'true' femininity. They are physically

unable to disentangle themselves and are irreversibly trapped in the oppressive system that forced them to forfeit their autonomy. Apart from that, one has to keep in mind that "they would just fold themselves into the needlework, like it was what they wanted" (Machado 135). Weaving oneself into clothes could represent an extreme act of martyrdom that aims to incite shock to convey a message effectively. Fearing both reintegration into the patriarchal symbolic order as well as total obliteration found in the physical death of the body, they redefine their roles on their own terms. The dress-women abnegate erasure and willingly immortalize themselves in the very torture garment that played a vital role in their previous lives as female members of a patriarchal society. Forever displaced and displayed, they protect other women by repelling the male gaze. Moreover, they implement a feminine mode of discourse, one that exploits silence, bodily subordination as well as one-dimensionality to re-fashion the surrounding man-made reality. Their oscillation between omnipresence and invisibility, empowerment, and disempowerment, can be easily misunderstood. Campbell contends that "the prom dress […] unlike the magical fairy-tale dresses, cannot transform a life," however, it can certainly change the attitude of other women as is exemplified by the unnamed narrator (306).

The Not-Yet-Incorporeal Women

The most striking examples of abject women are perhaps those who wander within the liminal zone of the un-dead. Body horror and Kristeva's theory of abjection converge in the depiction of translucent female bodies. The first video-documented case of a fading woman coincides with the readers' initial introduction to the phenomenon when a landlord tries to evict an unresponsive female tenant by breaking into her apartment: "She was naked, and trying to conceal it. You could see her breasts through her arm, the wall through her torso. She was crying" (Machado 128). This recording of a disappearing woman, which eventually goes viral, creates discomfort on two levels. On the one hand, readers witness a man brutally invading the space of a woman in her most vulnerable state. Even then, she unconsciously tries to conform to societal norms of female modesty, by covering up her malfunctioning body. Ironically, her unexplainable condition not only signifies erasure and looming death, but also renders her physically unable to meet societal expectations. By the same token, her transparent body evokes more horror than an actual corpse as it contradicts the natural laws of human existence. Even the narrator comments that acquaintances of fading women were frequently expecting to find their loved one's deceased, but "what they actually found was worse" (127). A corpse can be assigned to the realm of death, but her in-between state violates the symbolic order. She is, essentially, a human with an inhuman condition that eludes scientific definition and patriarchal, 'rational' reasoning (cf. Cruz 166). Neither an object of desire, nor a subject that could act autonomously, the ghostly abject lies beyond the reach of male hegemony. She can no longer experience violent oppression and she can no longer participate in a male-governed world; however, she can continue to haunt her oppressors and remind them that their contrived system rests on a crumbling foundation.

Although the vanishing act evidently provides some sort of liberation, almost the entire cast of characters seeks stability as opposed to fogginess. In one instance, Chris oversteps the narrator's personal boundaries to press "his thumb into [her] collarbone, quickly," with utmost urgency, as if to check whether his world already started to implode (Machado 129). Being solid carries a double-meaning because it emphasizes the good, substantial quality of an object and concurrently distinguishes acceptable from deviant women. Bodies, however, that cannot be grasped burst the borders of meaning, produce ambiguity, and delineate the limits of male power.

Thus, the public perceives fading as a threat and harbinger of death, which most other female characters internalize. Petra and the narrator repeatedly discuss what 'actually' happens to the women who have faded completely, but 'dying' and 'death' remain the most commonly used explanations (cf. Machado 140, 142, 144). Accordingly, disappearance is equated to lack of control for all parties involved (cf. Więckowska 86). Petra tries to reclaim her self-agency by plunging "the dart from the target […] deep onto the back of her hand, just below the knuckles" (Machado 142). What is striking is the fact that Petra's act of self-mutilation is reminiscent of the dress-women's dehumanization project. Female defiance, whether aimed at escaping from or staying within the patriarchal system, ultimately links to pain. Moreover, the placement of the dart and the subsequent wounding shows remarkable similarities with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. If one carries this thought through, she, as well as the other fading women, sacrifices herself for the sins committed by the patriarchy, to eventually redeem humanity.

During intercourse, the narrator describes Petra in her most abject state: "Each episode shows a different view of her – a skeleton, ropy muscles, the dark shapes of her organs, nothing" (Machado 143). Her repeated metamorphoses allow for the intrusion of 'the Real' into the symbolic order. Not only does she deviate from a heterosexual, binary matrix by being a queer woman, but her physically unstable existence renders her 'unattractive' and thus no longer an object of lust. In patriarchal terms, it should be impossible to gain insights into her 'real' body. Her translucent bodily layers openly display the materiality and fragility of a human body, hence serving as a memento of mortality. Furthermore, Petra's visceral body illustrates the basic biological interior of humans that, in contrast to outer appearance, applies to (almost) everyone. Consequently, the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' are abrogated and categorization along the lines of social markers becomes irrelevant. Materiality, bodily functions, and diversity "have the potential to subvert patriarchal gender codes related to corporeality" (Edwards and Graulund 32). Although abjection, according to Kristeva, should initiate a negative reaction, the protagonist refrains from remarking on Petra's morbid transformations. Instead, she is willing to ignore superficiality, to explore her different states, and to accept her partner's multilayered, complex identity. The body horror that triggers shock and disgust within readers at first is readily counteracted by the protagonist's reaction, which makes the visceral body suddenly appear less abnormal. At last, Petra's changes are mere 'natural' representations of the human body.

Abjection loses its negative impact by means of literary mediation. Petra's body does function as a medium, ergo, an object, to criticize society's obsession with female bodies, however, it simultaneously normalizes divergent performances of gender and body norms (cf. Ross 154). Therefore, abjects help to demystify idealized social constructs. On top of this, they aid to increase the complexity in regard to debates surrounding female body politics. "Real Women Have Bodies" dares to ask the subtle question of what would happen if women were to lose control of their bodies – and dares to provide the even more outrageous answer: "The flickering body as a pattern and randomness is one that cannot be completely programmed" (Ross 154). Absence, lack, and failure coexist with an ever-changing identity. It is no coincidence that no culprit is held accountable for the women's fading. 'Dis-appearance,' being apart from the judging public eye as well as one's superficial container, is presented as an opportunity to transcend corporeality. Invisibility, then, whether silently played out in a garment or stridently lived out through infiltrating "electrical systems […] ATMs and voting machines," becomes a viable solution to avoid possession by others, to experiment with one's own life, and to regain self-agency eventually (Machado 144).

Conclusion

Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" harbors a range of female characters that are carefully constructed as abject. Paired with the subgenre of body horror, they continuously transgress portrayals of 'conventionally' feminine women. Abjection acts as a ubiquitous motif to "heighten the natural everyday horrors women face" (Rapoport 223). However, the women's position between the two poles of subject vs. object creates an area of constant conflict that remains unresolved until the end. This tension is necessary to direct the reader's attention to more global issues such as internalized sexism, queerphobia, and women's emancipation from a patriarchal society. Although representing a piece of feminist literature, it critically dissects the growing dissonance within its own movement. Female pluralities cannot be fused into merely one signifier. The fight for equality of the sexes, women's rights, and interests goes astray as soon as individual needs and goals are rejected in favor of universal ideologies. Just as the unnamed narrator believes that she commits a heroic deed by 'freeing' her 'unenlightened sisters,' the dress-women follow their own political agenda. Even though the narrator starts to mimic patriarchal violence, the dress-women endure the forceful disentanglement and stay united in the back room to show their resistance. Despite the mothers' cruel acts and complicity with patriarchy, they simultaneously secure other women's continued existence. Feminism, in Machado's story, thus has many faces. She thrusts aside 'traditional' schools of feminist thought to elucidate the single fates of individuals. Women are painted as versatile to deliberately obstruct categorization. She challenges her audience to interpenetrate, to judge, and to re-evaluate the female characters time and again to highlight the readers' own fear of ambiguity, blurred bounds, abjection. In the end, Machado never provides any answers. Instead, she scatters an array of questions without question marks and repeatedly destabilizes her readers' sense of security. Interweaving the fates of various women into the fabric of narrative eventually becomes a productive means to illuminate the complexity of women's identities without robbing them of their agency.

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Elisabeth Kashulskaya (she/her) is a root(h)less cosmopolitan eager to make a positive impact on future generations. She is currently pursuing a Master's Teacher Training Course for Grammar Schools (English & German) in hopes of passing on her passion for languages, social justice, and people of all stripes in inclusive and inspiring learning environments. Her research interests are merely limited to all imaginable, not-quite-imaginable as well as unimaginable concepts; it should be noted, however, that this list is by no means exhaustive. During leisure time, she enjoys engaging in battles of wits, innovating her mind, or exploring alternative realities.

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Unveiling the Unseen Realities: Octavia Butler's Exploration of Disability and Society in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987)

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Abstract

Disability studies is a comparatively new field within literary studies, focusing on the portrayal of disabilities in literature and the complex connotations, perceptions, and systems of oppression associated with it. This article examines Octavia Butler's short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," which revolves around the fictional hereditary Duryea-Gode-Disease (DGD) and reveals the pervasive structural oppression experienced by affected characters. The discussion covers the concepts of ableism, empowerment, and intersectionality. Butler's narrative presents a path towards liberation from discrimination, while underscoring the varying impact of this discrimination based on the individual's intersectional identity. Ultimately, the examination highlights the significance of communal support as a vital tool in resisting discrimination. It also illustrates how the disease intersects with other social categories to shape unique experiences of oppression.

Keywords

Disability studies – Octavia Butler – Science Fiction – Discrimination

Introduction

Octavia Butler is a trailblazing figure in the realm of science fiction who embodies a symbol of creative empowerment for Black women authors. Defying societal expectations as a working-class Black woman with dyslexia (Schalk 37), Butler's pioneering spirit led her to become an esteemed author, being honored with prestigious prizes such as the Hugo and the Nebula awards (Hampton and Parker 1). Several of her works, including her acclaimed novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), delve into the intricacies of oppression and the intersectionality of various forms of discrimination (Lothian 74). According to Weinbaum, the central inquiry that could potentially underlie Butler's entire corpus is "the construction of the concept of 'human being'" (2). Both the human experience and themes of oppression and discrimination are evident in her short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," which was initially published in *Omni* magazine in 1987 before circulating in her collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (Cavalcanti and De La Roque 58).[1]

The short story revolves around a fictional hereditary illness known as the Duryea-Gode disease, synthesized by combining aspects of Huntington's disease, Phenylketonuria, and Lesch-

[1] In the following, I will refer to the short story as "The Evening."

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Nyhan disease (Butler, "Afterword" 69).[2] At first, the disease remains asymptomatic, primarily impacting the patient's diet and medical treatment. The symptomatic phase, called the 'drift', manifests during later stages of adulthood, during which DGD patients experience self-harming tendencies and even resort to self-cannibalism.[3] Being affected by DGD results in severe discrimination and isolation, exemplarily shown by Lynn Mortimer, the protagonist and narrator of the story. She recounts her time spent in a DGD ward, her parents' death, and her college years, where she meets Alan Chi, her future boyfriend. He, too, suffers from the disease. At the story's climax, Lynn and Alan visit Dilg, a progressive facility dedicated to the care of people with DGD. There, they meet Beatrice, whose disease is astonishingly still under control at an advanced age. She guides them through Dilg to see Alan's mother Naomi, who, although drifted, appears to be stable. Alan and Lynn discover that female carriers of DGD whose parents both had the disease and who inherited it from their mother, like Lynn and Beatrice, possess a unique pheromone. This pheromone enables them to stabilize and interact with drifted DGD patients, facilitating communication and preventing them from self-harm. Given Lynn's possession of the pheromone, she is invaluable to Dilg. The story culminates with Beatrice inviting Lynn and Alan to join Dilg and help drifted DGDs.

Butler worked on the short story between 1966 and 1985 (Schalk 41), a period marked by social issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Civil Rights movement, the Women's movement, and other protest movements. One such movement was the Disability Rights movement, closely linked to the Deinstitutionalization movement (41). The latter advocated for people with disabilities to be transferred from state institutions into their families or community-based homes to be reintegrated into society (Fleischer Zames and Zames 33-4). Despite people with disabilities constituting the largest minority in America, the Disability Rights movement has been uniquely labeled as a "stealth movement" (215), receiving insufficient attention. Therefore, Butler's short story serves as an indispensable tool in raising public awareness about people with disabilities, especially as they are expected to grow in number due to technological advances and an ageing population (254).

While Butler's major literary works have received extensive scholarly attention, only a few analyses focus on "The Evening." Among these, notable contributions come from Sami Schalk and Gerry Canavan. Schalk posits that disability in the short story serves a dual purpose: it functions as both a metaphor for racism and as an exploration of living with a disability. She argues that Butler's storytelling challenges the traditional division between the disabled and non-disabled, prompting readers to rethink how disability and diversity can be perceived and envisioned (Hampton and Parker 4). In contrast, Canavan explores the themes of hope, cure, and the portrayal of Huntington's disease in a selection of Science Fiction works, including Butler's "The Evening." He argues that the story reimagines the narrative around genetic diseases, presenting them not solely as tragic but as part of a complex human experience that can include dignity, creativity, and a redefined sense of purpose. This argument challenges conventional depictions of genetic disorders and offers an optimistic perspective on living with such conditions.

Drawing on Schalk and Canavan's insights, this article aims to expand their examination of disability in Butler's short story. Like Schalk, I argue that "The Evening" explores the intersection of disability and society. In doing so, the story highlights the advantages of community, the

[2] Hereafter, I will refer to the Duryea-Gode disease as DGD, which is the initialism used in the short story.
[3] For the sake of linguistic diversity, I shall employ both terminologies, "individuals/people with DGD" and "DGDs," throughout this article. However, I am conscious of the preference towards person-first language and not identity-first language as advocated by Bogart and Dunn (653).

challenges faced by social outcasts, the emergence of a new social caste, and the pervasive discrimination experienced by individuals with Duryea-Gode disease. Ultimately, the story advocates for a more inclusive and compassionate society, emphasizing the significance of understanding and embracing people with disabilities. To substantiate my thesis, I shall focus on characterization, techniques of narration, and the negotiation of themes such as despair, hopelessness, and depression. The article will begin by establishing the theoretical framework and methodologies employed, including insights from disability studies, such as the concepts of ableism, empowerment, and intersectionality. The subsequent three sections will delve into various aspects of disability as portrayed in the story. First, I will explore the pervasive structural discrimination of individuals with DGD and its connection to ableism. The following section will underscore the significance of communal support in resisting such discrimination. Finally, I will conclude with an exploration of intersectional discrimination, revealing the complex challenges that the characters in the story encounter.

Disability Studies, Ableism, Empowerment, and Intersectionality

Methodologically, my main interest will be in the field of disability studies, a relatively recent area within literary studies. It was particularly the passage of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) in 1990 that marked a significant turning point leading to a surge of scholarship in disability studies (Altschuler and Cristobal 3). Disability studies delves into the societal connotations, symbolic representations, and pejorative perceptions linked to disability, examines the connections between these aspects and how they perpetuate exclusion and oppression, ultimately challenging the dominant belief that one's value as a human being is determined solely by their physical and mental capabilities (Allan 4). Through this lens, I will analyze the exclusion and oppression that the main characters in the short story experience and reveal how society construes the disabled body of people with DGD as "other, deviant, and nonnormative, when, in fact, human bodies exist along a spectrum of difference" (4).

The concept of ableism is central to disability studies, representing "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body […] that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" (Campbell 44). People with disabilities are consequently deemed imperfect and diminished human beings. Descriptions of the normative citizen, who serves as the benchmark for comparison, portray them as white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, and politically conservative (46). In the short story, ableism becomes evident as non-DGDs engage in discriminatory behavior by relying on stereotypes and prejudices, thereby contributing to the social oppression faced by those with DGD. Consequently, individuals with DGD internalize these biases, leading them to perceive themselves as less worthy than non-DGDs. Escaping internalized ableism demands individual empowerment and communal support, which is why this concept is pivotal for assessing the advantages of community. Feminists, community psychology, and public health especially embrace empowerment (Peterson 308). At its core, the empowerment of people with disabilities requires challenging existing power dynamics (Cornwall 343). Although the notion of empowerment lacks a precise definition, its fundamental interest is to comprehend the mechanisms that guide individuals to view themselves as capable and justified in assuming positions of decision-making (344). This liberation from internalized ableism, norms, or biases is essential for fostering a more inclusive society and will therefore play an important role in concluding my main analysis. Furthermore, communal support functions as a

powerful means of resistance against the collective marginalization experienced by individuals with DGD.

Lastly, I shall incorporate the idea of intersectionality. Intersectionality suggests that individuals may encounter multiple forms of oppression due to their membership in various intersecting social categories. This results in new and distinct forms of oppression that deviate from the mere sum of their constituent parts (Bernstein 322). For instance, a Black woman with a disability may face different patterns of oppression compared to a European man with a disability. Intersectional identities can encompass elements such as gender, biological sex, race, sexual orientation, disability status, or socioeconomic class (322). By examining the character's social identities, we can thus unveil more intricate forms of discrimination and gain insight into the unique experiences, struggles, and multifaceted layers of bias suffered by individuals with DGD.

In the subsequent sections, I will use the concepts of intersectionality, empowerment, and ableism to examine the exclusion and oppression experienced by the main characters in the short story, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles encountered by people with DGD.

Unravelling Ableism and Discrimination: The Birth of a New Caste

Thematically, Butler's story has two parts: The first part consists of Lynn's first-person account of her life with DGD which revolves around her parents' deaths, her experiences at school and in college, and her interactions with Alan and his background. The second part focuses on the visit to Dilg, which offers an alternate perspective on living with DGD and creates hope for the two main characters. This section will primarily address the first part, as it serves as a significant revelation of the ableism and discrimination experienced by Lynn and Alan. Employing a first-person narrator for the short story, with Lynn as both the narrating and experiencing I, is an especially effective technique: By focusing on her experiences, the readers develop an intimate connection with the protagonist, allowing them to delve into life with the disease. There is no escape from her thoughts or mood, just as Lynn cannot escape from her illness and the consequent discrimination she faces daily.

The story's beginning illustrates how mental illness and a physical disease often co-exist, describing Lynn's suicide attempt after her parents forced her to visit a DGD ward when she was 15 years old. The ward exposed her to the reckless and negligent care given to people with DGD in state institutions, traumatizing her even years later: "I hugged myself, remembering the young woman, bloody, cannibalizing herself as she lay at our feet, digging into her own flesh." (Butler, "The Evening" 486). The brutal death of her parents three years later adds to her trauma and reinforces her awareness that there is no escape from the disease:

> I wish I'd never found out. Dad had killed Mom then skinned her completely. At least, that's how I hope it happened. […] He broke some of her ribs, damaged her heart. Digging. Then he began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died. It was an especially bad example of the kind of thing that makes people afraid of us. (477)

Lynn's lack of purpose results in her feelings of despair, hopelessness and void that pervade her life and depict the central themes and leitmotifs of the story. Consequently, Lynn appears to be a rather static, one-dimensional character because she continuously mentions the disease, as if it

defines her entire character. Despite her progressing life, and her attendance at college, her mental state and temper never improve: "I can't say why I went to college […]. I didn't go with any particular hope. Hell, I knew what I was in for eventually. […] Whatever I did was just marking time. […] I thought about trying suicide again" (Butler, "The Evening" 478). The beginning of the short story therefore sets the deeply pessimistic and depressive tone that permeates the rest of the story. Launching the narrative in medias res emphasizes Lynn's perception of the disease as the center of her life and the core of her identity. The integrated exposition, which exposes the main information in small quantities throughout the story and woven into the action, further adds to this impression. Accounts about the disease, mortality, loss, and even the visit to Dilg are presented prior to disclosing Lynn's name, spotlighting their significance in shaping her identity. Most importantly, Lynn herself suggests that it is DGD that primarily defines her.

However, Lynn is not alone with her emotions. Depression seems to profoundly affect Lynn's boyfriend, Alan, too, expressing thoughts of suicide once he will notice first signs of drifting. In addition, he has already undergone sterilization to prevent passing on the disease to potential offspring (480). Lynn finds herself contemplating how he has managed to endure this far, given his bitterness and fragile will to live (481). Prior to their encounter, Lynn and Alan both experience social isolation, as they lack support from friends, because people tend to distance themselves as soon as they learn about their DGD illness. They also share the loss of their parents, not knowing at that time that Alan's mother is still alive. This shared sense of exclusion draws them closer together, prompting them to share personal experiences. Lynn unveils her visit to the DGD ward and her subsequent suicide attempt, revealing: "I had never told anyone else. I was surprised at how relieved it made me feel to tell him" (480). As Lynn spends time with Alan and resides in a home alongside fellow DGD students, she gains insight into why two individuals with DGD might contemplate marriage, reasoning "Who else would have us?" (480) Once more, themes of hopelessness and depression resurface, aligning with the pessimistic tone established in the beginning. The third and last character in the short story that gets to share experiences with the disease is Beatrice Alcantara, the doctor who introduces the couple to Dilg. She was among the first double DGD individuals to be born and, much like Lynn, faced the distressing realization of the inevitable outcome of the disease. This led her to attempt suicide when she was old enough to comprehend the situation (491). The three characters share a common sense of isolation and marginalization, caused by their own internalized beliefs but also by the non-DGD's deliberate distance from DGDs. Despite their current absence of disease symptoms, the inevitable prospect of drifting is enough to cast them into exclusion. To break down the various forms of discrimination, Schalk proposes three ways in which structural oppression manifests. The first one involves stringent regulations and institutions, through which politicians marginalize people with DGD (Schalk 41). The most common institution for people experiencing a drift is a hospital ward, resembling a prison, where they are isolated from the public. Some cases even result in patients being confined to bare rooms, left to deteriorate on their own (Butler, "The Evening" 487). The sole alternative to these wards is Dilg, yet details about the retreat's approach are not disclosed to the public and the waiting list is long (478). The second means of oppression is the social discrimination these individuals face (Schalk 44). As the only possible treatment, DGD patients must adhere to a specific diet to live as 'normal' as possible until they drift. Additionally, they must wear a medical emblem, as non-DGD medications do not work in emergencies. The combination of the diet and emblem immediately identifies them as disabled, creating a sense of inferiority and shame as well as marking them as other. Some try to pass as non-disabled by refusing to wear the emblem, resulting in tragic consequences: "Every now and then there are news stories about people

who stopped carrying their emblems […]. Then they have an accident. By the time anyone realizes there is anything wrong, it's too late" (Butler, "The Evening" 479). Lynn, too, refrains from eating in public, as the persisted stares of others left her feeling uneasy (478). The desire to appear 'normal' stems from internalized ableism, leading them to perceive disability itself as intrinsically negative (Campbell 46). Being visibly disabled subjects them to social rejection and exclusion from the non-disabled community relegating them to the status of societal outsiders who can only find solace in their own company, refraining from interaction with individuals without DGD (Allan 9). Beyond these challenges, people with DGD also encounter difficulties in finding housing, employment, and educational opportunities (Butler, "The Evening" 478), adding to their social discrimination.

The first two forms of oppression originate from society, specifically from individuals without disability. However, the third form, self-discrimination and internalized oppression (Schalk 44), emerges because of the previous two methods and originates within the oppressed individuals themselves. This is evident in Alan and Lynn's shattered self-confidence, lack of pride and feeling of worthlessness. Lynn assumes that the topic of sterilization has crossed the minds of all DGDs when discussing Alan's choice to undergo the procedure, revealing her own internalized oppression. Alan, too, describes himself and other DGDs as if they were a plague that should be eradicated: "Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us" (Butler, "The Evening" 480). Upon encountering Alan as a potential roommate, Lynn acknowledges that their only shared trait is the disease, yet she continues engaging in conversation with him. Familiar with the pattern of people eventually leaving her, Lynn requires time to become more candid with Alan, mirroring her parents' early death.

Altogether, the interplay of structural, social, and internalized bias (Schalk 45) results in the partition of the story's fictional society into two castes: people with DGD as opposed to people without DGD. This dichotomy inherently establishes a social hierarchy where those without disability hold a superior position over individuals with DGD, again pointing to the concept of ableism. Lynn adopts this distinction by constantly talking about 'us' and 'them'. Although the castes are subtly ingrained within society, their explicit manifestation occurs as Lynn ponders Alan's prospects of gaining admission to medical school. His double inheritance might hinder his acceptance, and "[n]o one would tell him his bad genes were keeping him out, of course […]. Better to train doctors who were likely to live long enough to put their training to use" (Butler, "The Evening" 481). In the fictional world of the story, society thus limits access to certain opportunities and positions to people without DGD, as they are perceived to offer greater long-term economic productivity. The pervasive social discrimination described above further emphasizes this bias, effectively impeding equal opportunities for both castes. However, it is noteworthy that some DGDs are exceptionally good at sciences and even make significant genetic discoveries (478), which is why some individuals with DGD manage to be accepted into colleges and universities, underscoring the complexity of the issue of inequality.

The narrative perspective also plays an important role in shaping the reader's perception of the caste system, as it confines itself to the experiences of people with DGD. Consequently, the story offers an exclusive insight into their lives as marginalized members of society and gives no voice to non-DGDs who occupy a higher position within the social hierarchy. Lynn's choice of language underscores the deep internalization of ableism perpetuated by the caste system, as already indicated earlier. Her description of the disease-causing genes as "bad genes" (481), the deterioration process as going "bad" (478), and her persistent comparison between her current existence and an assumed 'normal' life vividly illustrate this internalized bias. She speaks of a "normal life span" (478), medications used for a "normal person" (479), and instances where

DGDs attempt to "pass as normal" (Butler, "The Evening" 479). This norm, which focuses on able-bodied individuals, functions as the tool of comparison, as established in the introduction, and consequently diminishes Lynn and Alan's sense of optimism.

In conclusion, the recurring themes, character dynamics, and societal mechanisms depicted in the short story demonstrate the profound discrimination endured by people with DGD. This exploration mirrors the two castes within the fictional society, creating social hierarchies and leading to inequality. Whereas the first part of the story is pervaded by a somber tone and is devoid of solutions for the challenges at hand, the second part introduces Dilg as a "semiutopian twist" (Schalk 46) that allows Lynn and Alan to discover the potential to mutually benefit from other DGDs, a development that further challenges their notion of 'normal'.

The Power of Community

The introduction of Dilg in the second part of the short story opens a promising possibility for the future and an alternative perspective for living with DGD by illustrating the experience of residing in a supportive community. Therefore, this section is essential for analyzing the power of community, particularly in supporting drifted individuals with DGD. Prior to the visit to Dilg, Lynn's expertise of living alongside other DGDs at college introduces the concept that communal living might serve as a potent form of resistance against the shared marginalization they have long endured. By establishing a small community, Lynn engineers an environment where no one must bear curious stares, social isolation, or discomfort any longer: "We'd all had enough of being lepers twenty-four hours a day" (Butler, "The Evening" 479). The bond between Lynn and Alan demonstrates how DGDs can find comfort in each other's company, becoming each other's reason to persevere (481). Resisting against oppression through communal bonds foreshadows the idea that Dilg comes to embody. Subsequently, Beatrice reveals that Lynn's concept of housing and her role as housemother proved effective due to her possession of a specific pheromone. This pheromone enables Lynn to earn trust from drifted DGDs, but also comforts controlled DGDs including her flat mates.

Dilg operates on the foundation of mutual support among DGDs, ensuring that their sense of purpose remains intact by keeping them at work. Individuals like Beatrice, who also possesses the pheromone, enable drifted DGDs to regain agency over their lives and portray a far superior alternative to traditional hospital wards. The facility illustrates a large-scale and further developed version of Lynn and Alan's shared house at college. Drawing parallels with the Deinstitutionalization movement, the distinction between wards and Dilg reflects the shift from state institutions to community-based ones. In contrast to the depressing outlook within a ward, Dilg offers a life with active community involvement, as demonstrated by Beatrice. Instead of being perceived as incapable, Dilg acknowledges the patients for their worth, and they can fully accept themselves. For example, a drifted DGD patient successfully developed palmprint locks for Dilg, only made possible by the support of the community (492). Dilg therefore emerges as a symbol of hope and optimism. This theme resonates with ideas developed throughout Butler's work, where she frequently portrays marginalized individuals collectively engineering novel ways to navigate their challenging circumstances (Yaszek 64-5). In a similar vein, Dilg's success is deeply intertwined with its community-based approach. The interdependence of DGDs within this environment displays the significance of working together to create a more inclusive and nurturing world, challenging normative understandings of ability. If society were to fully embrace the differences of individuals with DGD – acknowledging their distinctive dietary requirements, the possibility of

drifting, and their self-destructive tendencies – they could benefit the economy. Furthermore, recognizing their exceptional abilities for intense concentration and competence in sciences could give them a meaningful sense of purpose. Drifted DGD patients retain their value as productive members of society, as they possess the ability to read, write, and contribute to existing research, thereby remaining a valuable part of the labor force. In 1999, Senator Edward M. Kennedy aptly stated his perspective on disability when the Work Incentives Improvement Act was passed, allowing individuals in need of healthcare benefits to work without forfeiting them: "We must banish the patronizing mind-set that disabled people are unable. In fact, they have enormous talent, and America cannot effort to waste an ounce of it" (qtd. in Fleischer Zames and Zames xxi). This perspective aligns with the approach of disability studies, which conceptualizes disability not as a personal flaw, but rather as an outcome of social injustice. According to this view, addressing disability entails not wanting to fix the individual's perceived deficiencies, but instead emphasizes the need for modifications to the social and physical surrounding (Allan 4). For individuals with DGD, however, this transformative process remains distant, as the priority lies first in enhancing their quality of life upon entering the symptomatic phase of the disease.

Beatrice's character development shows the life-altering power of the retreat, giving her life a purpose derived from her indispensable role in helping drifted DGDs. Despite her own battles with suicidal thoughts that once placed her in the same mental state as Alan and Lynn, Beatrice feels empowered and achieves a renewed sense of dignity in the community, where she finds her place and purpose. In turn, she becomes an agent of empowerment for her community members, orchestrating a shift in the prevailing power dynamics. Instead of being subject to the authority of state institutions, drifted DGD patients regain agency over their own lives. Individuals like Beatrice and Lynn hold a unique and precarious position, as they must exercise their authority responsibly, refraining from any misuse of power. Such misconduct would reintroduce inequality and undermine the progress of empowerment. This empowerment, however, does not blind her to the realities of the disease, as she, like Alan, voices her standpoint of eradicating the disease's further spread (Butler, "The Evening" 490). She believes in supporting and uplifting existing individuals with DGD in navigating their lives and drift, but in preventing the birth of new DGDs. While Lynn expresses her interest in joining Dilg, Alan utters his fear of becoming dependent on a DGD with the pheromone, like Lynn or Beatrice. The latter reminds him of the remaining autonomy of drifted patients and that "the people of Dilg are problem solvers […]. Think of the problems you could solve!" (492). In the world of Butler's short story, interdependence is thus not negatively connoted, but portrayed as a means of retaining one's own dignity (Canavan 184).

Although the narrative portrays a closely-knit DGD community with Dilg, it is crucial to remain critically aware of the ongoing lack of integration between DGDs and non-DGDs, constituting the broader society. This disparity becomes strikingly evident when Beatrice notes the continued existence of wards that neglect to assist patients with DGD, a result of "greed and indifference" (487). The deliberate absence accentuates the need for societal change and acceptance, highlighting the potential of diverse communities coming together. Another issue that emerges is the territorial behavior among DGDs who possess the pheromone (490). This territoriality is evident in the immediate aversion between Lynn and Beatrice, even though they have never met before. Lynn notes the different impact Beatrice has on her compared to Alan: "What was it about that old lady that relaxed him but put me on edge?" (485). Consequently, one retreat can only accommodate a single pheromone-bearing DGD, showing the limitations of communal living.

Overall, Dilg validates the profound strength that emerges from a strongly tied community. It is proof of the power of communal support, where shared experiences foster resilience, inspiration, and empowerment. By embracing the ideals of unity and interdependence, Dilg embodies the potential for a future where communities, regardless of differences, can collectively pave the way for a more inclusive and compassionate world.

Intersecting Systems of Discrimination

Having highlighted the discriminatory mechanisms within the narrative and the role of community in restoring a sense of self-worth, my analysis will conclude by exploring the impact of intersecting social identities on these discriminatory processes.

In the broader context of Butler's work, the short story stands as an anomaly, as most of the characters remain devoid of explicit racial identification (Schalk 36). Unlike her typical portrayal of a Black woman as the central figure in most of her narratives (Pickens 167), the only character in "The Evening" with a specified background is Alan, whose father is of Nigerian origin. Significantly, the only character whose race is mentioned is Black, and this detail is mentioned twice within Lynn's description of him: "He extended a *dark*, square hand, and I took it and moved closer to him. He was a *dark*, square man […]" (Butler, "The Evening" 480, my emphasis). However, the association of race with mental or physical disability is a recurring motif in Butler's writing, a phenomenon that Pickens argues accentuates the need to focus on situating intersectional embodied experiences as a pivotal focal point for comprehending her literary work (167).

In the short story, Lynn and Alan both encounter distinct forms of discrimination. Lynn, a – presumably white – American woman with DGD, possesses the pheromone that makes her a rarity among DGDs. Conversely, Alan is a Black American man with Nigerian background and DGD and, additionally, does not carry the pheromone. Once people find out about the rare ability of Lynn, they might view her as superior to Alan and as having a better chance at finding a job. To a certain extent, one can interpret this circumstance as a reversal of traditional gender roles in the community of DGDs, given that only female carriers of double DGD, such as Lynn and Beatrice, possess the pheromone crucial for treating the disease (Cavalcanti and De La Roque 68). Because women are attributed a greater value in the context of DGD treatment, they could more readily replace men, leading them to question their worthiness to Dilg compared to women. This position sheds light on Alan's hesitation towards the open ending of the story when Beatrice invites him to join Dilg. Lynn accurately observes: "If the pheromone were something only men had, you would do it" (Butler, "The Evening" 493). Despite his potential contribution to the facility, the prospect of receiving directives from someone else after drifting terrifies him, clouding the outlook on the possibilities Dilg holds for him. Enhancing the significance of women with DGD may be attributed to Butler's incorporation of the ideas originating in the second wave of the Women's rights movement from the 1960s and 70s. This movement encompassed various aspects, including work and community domains (Zaki 245).

In addition to these dynamics, the category of class is involved. Both central characters appear to come from middle-class backgrounds, having enrolled in college, with Lynn even receiving a scholarship from Dilg due to her unique ability (Butler, "The Evening" 491). This privilege grants them access to education, enables them to cover living expenses, and allows them to focus on their professional careers. However, if their educational paths were different, this would impact how individuals without DGD perceive them and add to their discrimination. Therefore, this example illustrates that discriminatory experiences differ significantly, as DGDs who belong

to a lower social class might face different challenges than Lynn and Alan. Beatrice, as another important character, is a trained doctor, underscoring her value for Dilg. Her professional expertise enabled her to be among those who detected the pheromone and therefore places her in the category of DGDs who "made scientific and medical history" (Butler, "The Evening" 478). As a result, owing to her reputation, it is likely that Beatrice's experiences and circumstances differ significantly from those of less educated individuals with DGD.

This glimpse into the impact of intersectional identities serves to illustrate how individuals with the disease encounter various forms of discrimination, emphasizing the diversity of their experiences and the impossibility of labelling them. This observation aligns with Schalk's contention that disability represents just one of several lenses through which the narrative can be examined. The discrimination depicted not only targets individuals with disabilities in society but can also extend to other marginalized communities, encompassing Black people, the working-class population, immigrants, and members of the queer community (Schalk 37-40). This, in turn, connects to Roberts' assertion that civil rights movements share a common goal and thus are united in their pursuit of equality and their fight against the "stereotypes of weakness and passivity that society placed on them" (qtd. in Fleischer Zames and Zames 38).

Paths of Change: Hope for an Inclusive Society

"The Evening" effectively exposes the systematic discrimination faced by people with DGD. The recurring leitmotifs of despair, hopelessness, and emptiness, coupled with the pessimistic tone, depict the challenges of living with a disability. These themes extend across all characters, including Lynn, Alan, Alan's mother, Lynn's parents and flat mates. The narrative's first-person narrator and the deliberate lack of character development of Lynn and Alan intensify the sense of entrapment within the disease. The triad of oppression, encompassing institutional and legal bias, societal discrimination, and self-discrimination stemming from internalized oppression, unmask the entanglement of discrimination originating from both non-DGDs and DGDs due to their internalized ableism. This system has generated a social hierarchy within the fictional society of "The Evening," dividing it into two groups: those with the disability and those without.

The story's proposed solution revolves around communal living, exemplified through Lynn's college housing, her bond with Alan, and Dilg. Within a community, individuals can benefit from one another while finding personal acceptance and empowerment. Simultaneously, they retain the ability to contribute to society through labor by using their scientific aptitude. The comparison with the Deinstitutionalization movement highlights the influence of American social issues on Butler's work. Despite Dilg symbolizing hope, community building at Dilg remains just the initial step in the fight against inequality. Broader societal integration stays elusive, and the issue of territorial behavior among DGDs carrying the pheromone persists.

Ultimately, the exploration of intersectionality in the short story illuminates the diverse factors shaping the forms of oppression individuals with DGD endure, depending for example on social class, race, and reputation. The creation of a world where only women can carry the pheromone, essential for treating drifted DGD patients, hints at a gender role reversal within the DGD community. Deeper insights could emerge through extended analysis, comparing the various ways of oppression to other discriminatory groups beyond just disability. This expansion could encompass gender, the LGBTQ+ community or the working class. For instance, while not explicitly stated in the story, Alan's racial background might additionally impede his equal

treatment. In conclusion, Butler's short story calls for inclusivity, draws attention to individuals with disabilities and, via Dilg, proposes an alternative to state institutions.

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Hyperobjects and Affect Theory: Understanding the End of Nature in Juliana Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache"

Claudia Alea Parrondo

Abstract
This article studies the use of Affect theory in relation to the notion of hyperobjects to explore if the latter can help transform complex environmental processes into culturally comprehensible concepts. Taking the notion of hyperobjects as a starting point, the cognitive effects of narrative are examined as a source of empathy, for the display of emotional content is one of the qualities of fiction. The article inquires if it can inform audiences' responses and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the essay explores the affective connection between human and non-human entities by applying the aforementioned theoretical concepts to a close reading of work by the contemporary American poet and critic Juliana Spahr, in particular her poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005/2011).

Keywords
Ecocriticism – Ecopoetry – Hyperobjects – Affect Theory – Narrative

Introduction
In these contemporary times when the effects of global warming and its consequences are evident, it seems more urgent than ever to understand these changes in order to raise awareness about some of the most pressing issues. Thus, this article explores if poetry can be used to transform environmental processes into culturally comprehensible concepts. It will propose a discussion of key concepts related to environmental and eco-critical theories that have emerged in the Anthropocene, in particular the notion of *hyperobjects*. Next, it will focus on Affect theory as well as on the cognitive implications of narratives. In this way, this article proposes narratives as a way to make these processes more understandable and to raise awareness of aspects that need pressing solutions. The first sections deal with the explanation of why and how emotions – as seen by cognitive researchers – can help us inhabit other realities through fiction. Furthermore, this essay will show the connection between Affect theory and hyperobjects, relating both to new perspectives on materiality with the so-called New Materialism. The article also examines their relation to Environmental Studies and continues by applying the state of the art and of the theories presented to a close reading of Juliana Spahr's poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005/2011). In her poem, Spahr presents various aspects that can be discussed from the

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perspective of the aforementioned theories. Ultimately, I suggest that "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" provides an example of how poetry can be used as a source of emotional explanation of the Anthropocene and its consequences.

The Anthropocene and Hyperobjects

Nature is a cultural and historically specific term that has been evolving and changing, affected by how we, as humans, conceptualize our identities and relations with the outside world. Thus, depending on the cultural paradigm of the time, nature could mean and stand for different things. Throughout history, issues such as industrialization and the exploitation of natural resources have changed human relationships with nature. These human-made processes of exploitation and alteration of the environment are now considered irreversible. As Nicole Merola states, "we have made the irrevocable shift from reading the 'great stone book of nature' to writing it" (26). As a consequence, we find ourselves living in the time of the Anthropocene, a term coined by Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s, popularized by Paul Crutzen in 2000, and formally proposed by the geologist Zalasiewicz in 2008 as a geological period (Rafferty). The Anthropocene, or "recent age of man," implies that human actions have non-reversibly altered "Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling" (Rafferty). Thus, it seems necessary to re-think how we, as humans, relate and bond with nature in this new paradigm where we have a new role, as we are the agents of these irreversible changes in nature. As stated by Merola, "[t]he pressures the Anthropocene puts on how to conceptualize humans, other nonhumans and other things also strains how to think amount the contours and roles of cultural forms and their work" (26).

For instance, British climatologist Mike Hulme explains how the weather has been understood as something moral, related to the divine plans, and how this concept is still present in our Western cultures (13-14). In this way, he argues that understanding climate change as "an imaginative idea […] constructed and endowed with meaning and value through cultural practice" (14-15). This implies that understanding these processes would be as important for the understanding of climate processes as are meteorology and other sciences. However, this poses a problem because understanding large, global processes is nearly impossible for the human mind. For this reason, Merola states that contemporary times are "a period when we must find ways to think about things and processes that are too big, nebulous, diffuse, and complicated to easily apprehend or comprehend," as the Anthropocene is "a period that simultaneously produces and demands scale confusion," a period in which "linear time and progressive narratives are undercut by the effects of the material persistence of things we thought would disappear (carbon emissions, plastics)" (26).

In his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010), British philosopher and critical theorist Timothy Morton introduces the idea of "hyperobjects," a concept that he expands in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013). According to Morton, "Hyperobjects" are products that will exist for a long duration, on a scale beyond human time. He explains that "these materials confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented frameworks" (*The Ecological* 19) because they have such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that we are unable to comprehend them. Morton claims that the existence of hyperobjects – such as climate change – marks the end of the world because traditional concepts such as "world," "nature," and "environment" are no longer relevant to human events. Moreover, he adds that two of the main properties of hyperobjects are viscosity, as they "stick" to other objects, and nonlocality, as they are so vast that they cannot be attached to a particular place (*Hyperobjects* 1). Similarly, hyperobjects cannot be located in time, so they inhabit

a "temporal undulation," which is to say that their massivity and transdimensionality surpasses human parameters (55). Finally, hyperobjects possess the property of "interobjectivity," as they are formed from interrelationships between objects (24).

Alexa Weik von Mossner adds that one of the main reasons why humans cannot understand the Anthropocene or global warming is that these processes are too vast to "allow for easy visualization," so that when we discuss them, we are trapped within the limits of our imaginations (*Affective Ecologies* 139). Weik von Mossner is among the contemporary theorists who claim that one of the possible solutions for the understanding of the complex processes taking place in the Anthropocene, as well as their consequences, is the use of narrative. The "narratological revision" of humanity's relationship with nature is an issue of crucial importance that, according to her, can help "[o]ur awareness and emotional reaction […] shape our expectations and, potentially, our actions" (*Affective Ecologies* 140). The human capacity to react – and, in consequence, to act – is intrinsically tied to our capacity to understand, for, as Weik von Mossner notes, "storytelling serves evolutionary purposes" ("Imagining Geological Agency" 83).

In turn, this awareness of the problem that hyperobjects pose beyond human time could help humanity understand the long-term damage caused to the planet ("Imagining Geological Agency" 84). Thus, Weik von Mossner highlights storytelling as a contribution to raising awareness, since narratives act as a means of transportation to alternative universes, allowing us to "live" different situations (84). The act of imagining thus becomes "crucial for understanding" (85). Weik von Mossner's claims are also supported by work from the cognitive sciences. For instance, Keith Oatley's *The Passionate Muse* (2012) argues that reading fiction can help people understand and navigate complex social situations by providing a space to practice empathy. Oatley, a cognitive psychologist and novelist, draws on research in psychology and neuroscience, as well as on literary studies to support his argument, as reading fiction can enhance readers' empathy, theory of mind, and other cognitive and social skills (Aldama 83-84).

The Power of Narrative

If art and fiction can help humans to understand complex processes such as global warming and its consequences, then it is worth examining how this can happen, and how we are able to relate to external elements through narratives. This article argues that affects are at the core of our understanding, as they allow us to relate to others and to our environment, and they can be projected into narratives that then come back to us when we consume them. For the past 30 years, Affect theory has explored how humans relate to their reality through emotions – that is, through cognition and embodiment. Affect theory is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the ways in which emotions, feelings, and sensations shape human experiences and behaviors. It emerged as a response to traditional approaches to emotion and cognition that emphasized rationality and conscious thought. Instead, affect theorists emphasize the role of unconscious processes, bodily sensations, and social and cultural contexts in shaping human affective experiences.

Brian Massumi is one of the most influential critics in Affect theory and is considered to be one of the founders of this field. Being the translator of the Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's postmodernist classic *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Massumi draws on the work of the two philosophers to describe affect as "an ability to affect and [to be] affected" (xv). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that "[f]lows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation,

microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject" (162), vindicating the affective quality of humans as something essential.

In 2018, literary scholars Jennifer Ladino and Kyle Bladow edited the volume *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, in which they state that "[a]ffects are at the center of contemporary biopolitics and are more public, more powerful, and more pertinent than ever" (1). Bladow and Ladino highlight the impact of narratives on our lives, stating that "reading is one instance in which affect begins at the 'micro-scale', and scholarship that draws on cognitive science to account for what happens affectively in readers is an area of growing interest" (3). Like other writers in the field of ecocriticism who, like Spinoza, have opposed Cartesian dualism, Bladow and Ladino highlight the importance of emotions as they were "theoretically suspect before the affective turn" in the same way as "'nature' was just suspect prior to the emergence of ecocriticism" (4). Narratives are so powerful because the brain does not distinguish between our own emotions and 'borrowed' ones. Emotions are thus a collective experience rather than an individual one. As Italian neurobiologists Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia explain in their volume *Mirrors in the Brain: How our Minds Shape Actions and Emotions*, "emotions, like actions, are immediately shared; the perception of pain or grief, or of disgust experienced by others, activates the same areas of the cerebral cortex that are involved when we experience these emotions ourselves" (xii). Therefore, according to Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, "affects should not be understood, as individualized emotion[s] […] but rather, in a Spinozist fashion, as the increase or decrease in capacities for action" (75). Similarly, Susanne Knaller emphasizes the collective aspect of emotions, adding that "behavioral patterns [are] closely linked to the acquisition of communicative and practical competencies within a social group" (18).

This "Spinozist" perspective implies a consideration of emotions as "thoughts of the body" (Davidson et all qtd. in Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 11). Indeed, Spinoza already defined *affectus* as "force of existing" (11). Thus, affects are an *embodied* experience, since we cannot separate feeling from experience – that is, the brain and soul from the body. As an expanded definition of affect, Heather Houser proposes that

> "affect" designates body-based feelings that arise in response to elicitors as varied as interpersonal and institutional relations, aesthetic experience, ideas, sensations, and material conditions in one's environment. Though there is a relation between affect and eliciting conditions, the relation is not determinate. That is, the same elicitor can excite different affects in different people, and sometimes affect has no specifiable catalyst. The embodied and the cognitive mingle in affect. The feeling grounds one in the present, but it is also coded by past experience and impinges on the future. (3)

Affect Theory and Ecocriticism

More recently, ecocritics have reshaped Affect theory through new materialist approaches that explore how humans relate to the environment and non-human elements (animals, plants, algae, but also rocks, rivers, etc.). This article suggests that narrative studies can provide valuable insights and tools for such new materialist approaches to the environment. Narrative studies can also help to reveal the ways in which material and discursive practices are intertwined. By examining stories about nature and the environment, we can better understand how these narratives shape our attitudes and behaviors towards the natural world. This can be particularly useful for new

materialist approaches, which often emphasize the need to move beyond a purely discursive understanding of the environment and to acknowledge the material forces that shape it.

Several collections are being dedicated to the study of ecocriticism from the perspective of Affect theory. For instance, the aforementioned *Affective Ecologies* (2017), Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino's volume *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018), or the special issue *Poesia contemporània i estudis afectius / Contemporary Poetry and Affect Theory*, co-edited by Margalida Pons Jaume and Caterina Calafat for the journal *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación / Culture, Language & Representation* (vol. 29, 2022). In these publications, affect is explored as the main element through which humans engage with narratives and, consequently, with the environment in which we inhabit these narratives. Drawing on these studies, this article explores ecopoetry, a genre of poetry that focuses on the natural world and the human relationship to the environment, as well as how that relationship has changed. Ecopoetry may reflect on issues such as climate change, species extinction, and human impact on the natural world. Drawing on twentieth-century poetic traditions such as Language Poetry, ecopoets, such as Juliana Spahr, also seek to explore new forms and techniques in order to reflect the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans. Ecopoetry can be seen as a form of environmental activism, as it seeks to raise awareness of environmental issues by denouncing and reflecting on the damage that humans cause to nature.

Indeed, affect comes from our ability to project ourselves and embody the cognitive experience through narrative, as Weik von Mossner explains: "[W]e use our bodies not only to understand human characters but also for our grasping of the environments that surround them" (*Affective Ecologies* 3). In this way, "affect is ecological 'by nature', since it operates at the confluence of environments, texts, and bodies – including nonhuman and inanimate bodies" (Bladow and Ladino 8). This also includes the category of environmental narrative as "any type of narrative in any media that foregrounds ecological issues and human-nature relationships" (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 3). As a consequence, Affect Theory would be key to "identify[ing] the emotions that circulate around environmental issues today, to clarify[ing] how that circulation works, to acknowledg[ing] the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify[ing] new affects emerging in our contemporary moment" (Bladow and Ladino 3). Moreover, this would help us to reevaluate familiar aspects by reconceptualizing environmental affects that "can be understood […] through the lens of ecocritical theory" (6). According to the literary scholar Marco Caracciolo, who specializes in the phenomenology of narrative, these processes, which extend approaches beyond anthropocentrism to include non-human actors, are based on a conceptual reattribution in which "biological, climatological and geological processes" are not seen as independent actions but as close to humans (313).

As an example of how ecopoetry can serve as a cultural product that promotes environmental awareness through emotion and narration, the following section explores Juliana Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache." Juliana Spahr is an American poet and scholar. She combines her poetry production with her works as a literary critic, sometimes mixing the two. In her "Poetic Statement," Spahr establishes her view of poetry when she states that "poetry is a troubled and troubling genre, full of desire and anger and support and protest" (131). The poets and scholars Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell explain Spahr's concern with the social and political aspects of poetry, as well as her interest in the "unreliability of the language as it is used to convey information, observations, political and personal realities" (3). According to Rankine and Sewell, Spahr combines the possibilities of the lyric tradition with a characteristic sound and rhythm to create an accumulative and hypnotic musicality – a style that evokes the tradition of avant-garde poets such as Gertrude Stein (7). On a thematic level, Rankine and Sewell also note Spahr's

"obsessive engagement with American life and Western culture," which she equally criticizes and celebrates. Some authors, such as Dianne Chisholm (2014), compare Spahr and Whitman with regard to her themes and use of the refrain. However, as the poet and environmental critic Tana Jean Welch points out, Spahr's message is "clearer" than that of the Language poets. As a post-language poet, Spahr "wants her poems to *mean*, to make certain points not *about* meaning, but about material-semiotic shapings" that are grounded in both the shapings and in the "interactive flux and flow" of the material world, while carrying an obvious political valence (Welch 4).

"Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache": An Affect-Theoretical and Ecocritical Analysis

The poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" explores the relationship between humans and nature over time, from the emergence of humans (both as a species as well as individuals) to the conquest of nature and its subsequent disappearance. It is divided into a sequence of five distinct parts named after the number of their appearance. Although this poem was first published in the literary journal *Tarpaulin Sky* in 2005 and then collected in Spahr's poetry collection *Well Then, There Now* (2011), it provides thematic and stylistic cohesion for her book. In this collection, Spahr explores economics, society and, especially ecology. Each poem in the book is located at a point in American geography that is closely related to Spahr's life, as indicated by the coordinates that accompany each poem's title. For instance, "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (from here referred to as "Gentle Now") is located in Chillicothe, Ohio, where Spahr was born and spent her childhood. As Spahr stated in her "Poetical Statement,"

> The town I grew up in was ugly and dirty. The town was dirty because it had a barely environmentally regulated papermill […]. Because the town was dirty, whenever I read poems about the beauty of the English countryside or New England woods, they made little sense to me. So then I went and found by accident this stuff that didn't seem to be some sort of weird lie, and because this stuff by Stein was so weird it at the least didn't seem to be lying in the usual ways, I clung to it. (132)

This quote illustrates Spahr's commitment to ecopoetics as well as social and political poetry. In *Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another*, Spahr explains that she was suspicious of Nature Poetry as it only represented natural elements, such as birds or trees, but it did not capture the threats, the "bulldozer […] that is destroying that bird's habitat" (69). Later, Spahr adds that when the poet Jonathan Skinner began publishing his journal *Ecopoetics*, she realized that ecopoetics was what she was looking for, defining it as "a poetics full of systemic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture" (71). Ecopoetry, as explained by the environmental researcher Nuno Marques, "examines the fractures caused by natural destruction in language, questioning poetry's capability to mourn and become a regenerative practice" as it works with "the embodiedness and materiality of poetry" (35).

In "Gentle Now", Spahr explores the relationship between the human and the nonhuman through the lens of dichotomous but unordered concepts such as nature/human, big/small, birth/death. These concepts create connections and, at the same time, the absence of connections that can be comprehended through an affective perspective of oppositions and ramifications. In this poem, Spahr's main themes can be identified through the poem's "engagement with human entanglement in large-scale ecological, economic, geopolitical, and social systems" (Merola 26),

dealing with what Merola calls "Anthropocene affects," those emotions such as "interpersonal hope, dis-ease, distraction, irritation, grief, anger, rage and 'west melancholy'" (31).

As for her poetic strategies, the most prevalent is experimentation, which Spahr uses to "question, encounter, materialize, and wrestle with the epistemological and ontological pressures that accrue to the newly self-reflexive, anxious position into which the Anthropocene interpellates us" (Merola 26). Another strategy used in "Gentle Now" would be fragmentation, which "could describe both the way language is arranged […] and a once-continuous habitat shattered into non-contiguous pieces" that would reflect the "scale confusion" the Anthropocene by definition presupposes (26). It also serves as a way to emphasize the place of the human as an agent in one of the main processes of the Anthropocene, mass extinction (32), which is arguably the central theme of the poem. In order to emotionally communicate mass extinction, Spahr relies on the refrain, the repetition of lines, and references to animal species that we should mourn because they are dead. In this respect, Perloff states that repetition is essential to remark "the rhythm in human exchange" and to show how each relationship evolves, so that "the composition must begin over and over again; the same words […] and the same sentences are repeated with slight variation, and gradually everything changes" (93).

As mentioned previously, in the printed edition, the poem begins with the geographic coordinates of Spahr's birthplace in Ohio. This will set the tone for the entire poem, as the location of Spahr's hometown will intrinsically connect the poem to emotion and affect. In the poem, Spahr presents us with a timeline of the relationship between humans and nature. The poem is divided into five parts, which can be identified with different themes that present a progression of nature's pollution. This progression goes hand in hand with the division of nature, encompassing all living and non-living beings, and delves into the dichotomy of nature versus culture, where humans and the humane are conceptually assimilated to culture in our contemporary times.

The part labeled "one" is organized in the form of a creation-like scene in which humans appear in an omnipresent nature that was there before their arrival, as they "come into" it (Spahr 124). The deictic pronoun "it" acts as a referential expression for nature, intensifying its existence and extension, implying that "it" covers and contains everything. In this first section of the poem, the use of colors adds sensory information and increases the emotional content as the reader can identify this place as their own birthplace:

> The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the
> ocean is there.
> Salmon and eels are moving between the brown and the
> brown and the blue.
> The green of the land is there. (124)

The poem presents nature as something that, at the same time, involves everything, but that also is the home of animals such as "Salmons and eels." Moreover, the amount of sensory information also indicates a stage before culture and civilization. In this way, natural elements are characterized by raw information obtained through the senses, mostly about color. This supposes that one of the most basic and first layers of information is obtained in the process of perception, without the need for any interpretation. The fragment thus remits the reader to a pre-individual stage, as all will receive the same sensory information, as if nature were a womb, reinforcing the idea of home.

The concept of home is also used in discussions of cultural identity, where 'home' can refer to a particular community, emphasizing the importance of the pronoun "we." As Chisholm notes,

Spahr's use of the universal pronoun "we" can be compared to Whitman's use of pronouns and search for the "communal" in American identity. Likewise, John Shoptaw suggests that "Gentle Now" mirrors Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" (399). The use of "we" enhances the engagement of the reader with the poem by implying that this place is the birthplace of all humanity. However, this use of "it" and "we" also implies the assimilation of humans into Nature and of Nature into humans – Nature is everywhere and everything. In this way, "one" focuses on humans just "being" part of Nature:

> We come into the world.
> …………………………
> Elders and youngers are there.
> …………………………
> And we begin to breathe.
> We come into the world and there it is.
> We come into the world without and we breathe it in. (124)

In the above lines, the verbs that relate to humans are subjects are "come," "begin," and "breathe." Consequently, humans do not have any remarkable agency. They simply inhabit nature and are a small part of it. The lines also suggest a sense of connection between the individual and the world around them, highlighting the act of breathing as a fundamental way of interacting with the environment. The verse "we come into the world and there it is" suggests that the world is already present, existing independently of our arrival. The idea of breathing into the world implies a reciprocal relationship between the individual and their environment, in which the individual inhales and exhales air, participating in a cycle of exchange and renewal. This metaphorical use of breath as a way of connecting to the world is also present in some of Spahr's other works, such as her poetry collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), in which she explores connections between humans and non-humans without any boundaries or hierarchies. As in this poem, the idea of the pre-existence of the world and the act of breathing it suggests that human beings are part of a larger system and that our individual actions are shaped by our experiences and relationships to that system.

The notion that the individual is shaped by their environment rather than being an entirely autonomous agent is a key theme in various philosophical and critical approaches, including some forms of environmental and ecocritical thought. While in part "one," emotions, senses, and being are the main themes, in part "two," the poetic voice expands this connection between humans and nature: "The stream was part of us and we were a part of the stream and we/ were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulf and oceans" (125). Similar to the way in which salmons navigate rivers and oceans in part "one," human beings are merely another integral piece of Nature. However, the line "And we began to learn the stream" (125) foreshadows a breaking point in what follows, as humans become different from nature by "learning" it. In this section, the learning process is sustained by a symbiotic relationship, exemplified by the absence of separation between nature and human, as expressed in the lines "We put our head together./ We put our heads together with all these things." The poetic voice enumerates a number of animals and plants, native to Spahr's birthplace. This could be interpreted as a critique of the dichotomy of Reason and Emotion, as the poem states that "the stream was various and full of/ information with its rotten with its cold," but humans still loved the stream as "we couldn't help this love because we arrived at the bank of the/ stream." In this way, emotion is what binds us to nature, and emotion can

remind the readers of the importance of nature by empathizing with the text. However, as noted earlier, the future rupture is foreshadowed by the use of the past tense in this fragment.

In part "three," the reader envisions a process of mourning that precedes the fragmentation between nature and humans. Consequently, the relationship between humans and other living beings is described by means of feelings, and the evolution of the relationship is marked by the use of the passive mode, which would change to a passive one that could indicate reciprocity.

> This is where we learned love and where we learned depth and
> were we learned layers and where we learned connections
> between layers.
> …………………………
> Our hearts took on new shapes, new shapes everyday as we went to
> the stream every day.
> …………………………
> We let ourselves love…
> …………………………
> And we shaped our hearts…
> …………………………
> We immersed ourselves in the shallow of the stream. (126-28)

Accompanying the previous verses, Spahr enumerates a list of animals, such as birds, fish, insects or larvae, plants, and algae. By stating this, love is shared without hierarchies among natural elements and without making any distinction between the human and the non-human, as the poem considers culturally marginalized animals like insects, or algae, elements that today's Western cultures usually find repulsive. The mention of "connections" is a core part of the meaning of the poem. The way in which the connections are created and maintained reflect Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept of the rhizome. As Deleuze and Guattari state, "[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (6) that are not hierarchically ordered, as "[t]here are no points or positions in a rhizome […] only lines" (7). Thus, Spahr's approach to nature in the poem would resemble the structure of a rhizome, since it does not maintain any order among its elements. Each element, from the stream to the larvae, is equally important. This lack of hierarchy encourages the affective relationships between the elements of the rhizome, as well as the affective response of the reader. The reason for this is that by the eliminating order, empathy is easily fostered.

As Chisholm explains, the use of repetitions "orchestrates a rhythm of developing affection" (129). This rhythm is what resembles the creation of connections in the poem; while the action develops, emotion is what ties it all together, as humans learn to love non-human elements, and the readers can develop the same feeling through the act of reading. The poem creates a web of connections both inside and outside the text, mediated by affection and emotion. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain (*ritournelle*) can be used as a way of "reterritorialization" (11). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explore the use of the refrain on music, something that can be extrapolated to poetry because of its use of rhythm. In this way, "Members of the same species enter into rhythmic characters at the same time as different species enter into melodic landscapes" (373). Deleuze and Guattari suggest using the rhizome in writing in order to increase the affective territory, as the rhizome deterritorializes the text (11). As they note, a territory "is

constituted at the same time as expressive qualities are selected or produced" (367). Consequently, the act of "deterritorialization" implies "an act of rhythm that has become expressive" (367). Spahr's usage of the refrain thus corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the refrain and how it creates affective relations through the repetition of the rhythm.

Following lists of Ohio's native species, the poem rephrases some verses that were also mentioned in part "two," with some differences:

> We immersed ourselves in the shallow stream. We lied down on the rocks on our narrow pillow stone and let the water pass over us and our heart was bathed in glochida and other things that attach to the flesh. (128)

The verses remark on the power of the stream as a soothing experience, using verbs that remark on sensory experiences. The use of the word "immersed" in the first stanza suggests a deep and complete engagement with the stream, and the reference to the "narrow pillow stone" implies that the speaker feels comfortable in the stream and has developed a relationship with it. However, the poem begins to sing a lament that reflects the mourning of human's separation from nature:

> And as we did this we sang.
> We sang gentle now.
> Gentle now clubshell,
> don't add to heartache. (128)

The refrain "Gentle now … / don't add to heartache" is repeated fifteen times, mentioning the species that appeared earlier in the poem, as the poetic voice mourns all the animals and plants already quoted. In this way, as previously stated, the speaker anticipates the rupture that will potentially trigger the endangerment – and even the extinction – of these beings. As Swensen and St. John note, with these repetitions Spahr "turns a given bit of language over and over until it opens from the inside out, becoming talismanic" and resembling a ritual that seeks more social repair rather than social critique (406). This ache of the heart, which gives the poem its name, is repeated at the end of part "three":

> Gentle now, we sang,
> Circle our heart in rapture, in love-ache. Circle our heart. (130)

These lines end with a call for reunion, as humans "ache" over the loss of nature. Here, grieving is a communal state, a feeling experienced and shared in the human group since the loss of nature affects all humans. In this way, the reader also becomes part of this group, as the grieving process is transmitted through this lament. As Chisholm states, as the living and non-living organisms quoted in the poem are native to Spahr's birthplace, they would "shape this habitat of the heart" (126). By losing them, the poetic voice loses part of its identity. However, as the speaker uses the universalizing pronoun "we," the readers are reminded of the nature of their respective hometowns. In this way, the poem works through connections of emotions conveyed by belonging, whether to a physical place related to the emotional realm of childhood and memories or to the textual emotional plane of the poem. Thus, sharing emotions would serve as a link in this exploration.

In part "four," this announced rupture becomes evident, as it is introduced in the first line, stating that the previous Eden-like situation is coming to an end, as it was previously announced:

> It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.
> It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our
> house.
> But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also. (130)

This section places us in the present, enhancing the simile of nature as a home, as Spahr points out that the stream was, in fact, close to her home. Now we enter a more material part of the poem, where waste invades the emotional planes and destroys the connections previously described. To achieve this, Spahr recurs to an enumeration of plastic waste elements that can be found anywhere, as opposed to the native Ohio species mentioned earlier. These plastic elements will eventually replace the natural non-human elements present in nature, as plastics will be there for multiple generations of humans until they decompose. As Marques notes, this substitution can be considered a reevaluation of "the aesthetic connection with the natural as a relation of contamination" (37). The speaker then, as if asking for responsibility, enumerates the situations that have produced these consequences as

> We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry…
> ……………………………….
> and roadways into our hearts. (Spahr 131)

After this list of human activities, the poetic voice specifies the kind of polluting elements and waste dropped:

> We let chloride, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron….
> ……………………………….
> […] and lead go
> through our skin and into our body tissues.
> We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time of
> chemicals combining, at the time the stream run off.
> These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us
> but we did not know it yet. (131)

This passage establishes the end of nature as it was described in "one." Nature has lost its agency, as man-made materials repopulate the stream and replace the animals previously listed by the poetic voice. As a consequence, chemical waste has also invaded us, polluting our systems and our bodies. However, we are unaware of this process of contamination as the poem establishes that "we did not know it yet" but it will get worse as it "would become more a part of us," but as the speaker states, "Still we noticed enough to sing a lament" (131). From here, the poem will again list almost the same species, but this time as a way of announcing their death and extinction. Humans are also directly affected by this, as the poem explains that the chemical waste enters "through our skin and into our body tissues" (131), recalling the notion of the hyperobject. As aforementioned, when discussing the properties of hyperobjects, Morton explains that the hyperobjects are "nonlocal" because they are so massive that they cannot be placed in a specific space (*Hyperobjects* 1). Morton

explains that "endocrine disruptors penetrate my body through my skin, my lungs, and my food" (38), regardless of where he is. Consequently, chemical waste cannot be traced nor located. Nonlocality can also be linked to the property of "viscosity"; hyperobjects "stick" to other objects, absorbing them, as Morton explains "[t]he mirror itself has become part of my flesh […] I have become part of the mirror's flesh, reflecting hyperobjects every-where" (*Hyperobjects* 8).

In "five," the universalizing pronoun "we" is replaced by the pronoun "I"; not only are humans outside of nature, they no longer form a community. In this way, humans inhabit a completely disconnected and isolated world. As a result, emotions are no longer shared. Instead, a list of artificial products called "stream" replace the speaker's knowledge of nature:

> I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream Total
> Cholesterol Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald Stream Fabric
> Softener Dryer Sheet … (132)

Other products with the word stream are connected to the verbs "use," "put," "keep," and "buy" (Spahr 132). Thus, capitalism and consumerism substitute Ohio's natural elements, which are being indirectly killed in order to sustain the economic system. Now, the poem presents the readers with a new scenario, set in the Anthropocene, in which human actions shape nature, especially through its destruction. Again, a link between waste and plastic and the end of nature can be argued through the presence of plastic, a hyperobject. As Morton explains, hyperobjects are based on interobjectivity, that is, hyperobjects rely on the interrelationships between objects (*Hyperobjects* 81). In the case of the verses above, the relation between the stream, the anaphoric name of the products, and the fact that it is now waste that inhabits the stream shows how interobjectivity works. Plastic replaces the river not only by taking its name, but also by indirectly inhabiting it Moreover, by using brands that can be found all over the United States, this stream becomes part of a hyperobject, as it could be anywhere, unlike when the stream was populated by Ohio's native species, referring to the property of nonlocality.

The speaker, then, realizes these deaths that were already hinted in the middle of the poem, and tries to restore the connection by repeating an action that has already been done, as she "put[s] [her] head together on a narrow pillow" (133). By repeating an action conducted previous to the existence of the Anthropocene, the speaker attempts to stop the process of destroying nature. However, this process cannot be stopped because it has already started, as evidenced by the fact that she can no longer sing the lament, she can no longer mourn – there is no nature left to be lost.

Conclusion

Human exploitation of natural resources has permanently altered humans' relationship with the environment, and consequently, the concept of nature. Taking control of the human role in our contemporary world seems more relevant than ever. The concept of hyperobjects serves as a tool to conceptualize and frame these problems of understanding massive processes and their consequences. To address this, narratives have been proven to be a powerful source for inhabiting different spaces and developing empathy, which then influences our responses and relationships as individuals. As our actions are shaped by our emotions, Affect theory allows us to understand how fiction can help us navigate our place in this changing world. In this way, understanding the affective dimensions of our engagement with hyperobjects can inform our responses, actions, and decision-making processes. Combining the concept of hyperobjects and Affect theory enables us

to acquire a more profound perception of the emotional dimensions of how hyperobjects behave and the consequences that they can have. Therefore, these aspects impact our views, experiences, and reactions to such phenomena. In Spahr's poem, the usage of refrain reflects the changing relationships between humans and nature, and the complex affective interconnections between human and non-human elements. In this way, the poem reflects how plastic – a kind of hyperobject – begins to replace the native species of the stream. Through the use of the refrain, the poetic voice is allowed to grieve and, ultimately, to communicate the end of nature to the reader.

Author Biography

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"I'll Call it Platonic Magic": Queer Joy, Metafiction, and Aro-Ace Autofictional Selves in Alice Oseman's *Loveless*

Alissa Lienhard

Abstract

This article examines how Alice Oseman's novel *Loveless* employs both metafiction and autofiction in its narration to establish queer joy. Metafiction hereby connects to romance tropes that are both employed by and reflected on by the protagonist, while the presence of autofictional selves of Oseman relates to asexuality and aromanticism. The analysis considers the struggles, confusion, and pain as depicted in the protagonist's story, specifically in (autofictional) connection to Oseman and their statements about their own journey as an aromantic and asexual (shortened as aro-ace) person. Most centrally however, both the self-awareness of metafiction and the authenticity of autofiction are read in close connection to queer joy . Ultimately, this article argues that *Loveless* functions as an alternative love story to the heteronormative script, furthering aro-ace representation and offering hope to any reader seeking love beyond heteronormative romance.

Keywords

Autofiction – Metafiction – Asexuality – Romance Fiction – Queer Joy – YA Novel

Introduction

"Georgia …" Tommy leant in close, and then it hit me.
The disgust.
A wave of absolute, unbridled disgust.
– *Oseman,* Loveless *(25-26)*

Loveless (2020)*,* Alice Oseman's fourth young adult novel, focuses on its protagonist Georgia's quest for romance and love. In the second chapter of the novel, readers already learn that Georgia "love[s] romance" and she reveals an almost obsessive interest in the romantic love she finds in fanfiction and movies (8). Despite being a 'late bloomer,' Georgia starts her first-person narrative on an optimistic note, certain that her "big love story would come" (9). In the end, this turns out to be true, but not in the way she imagined. The plot mostly details her first year at Durham University, during which she slowly befriends her new roommate Rooney, stumbles through self-discoveries and navigates changing friendship dynamics with her two best friends from school, Pippa and Jason. In a desperate attempt to find love, Georgia dates Jason, despite not being in love

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with him. By later testing out whether she might be gay through kissing Rooney, she also derails a blossoming romance between Rooney and Pip. In the last chapters of *Loveless*, Georgia realizes not only that she is asexual and aromantic but also that her confusion has caused harm to all of her closest friends. Her big love story is ultimately about recognizing that Rooney is her platonic soulmate and "acknowledging and celebrating the love she already has in her life: the love between her and her friends" (Henderson, "Alice Oseman and"). Georgia's story is also about coming to terms with her queer identity as aro-ace (aromantic and asexual) and the people and university groups who help her along the way. Oseman herself[1] describes the book as having a narrative that does not "shy away from the dark stuff" ("An Interview"), specifically when Georgia struggles with accepting herself and ends up damaging others along the way. However, *Loveless* ultimately ends with a rom-com style happy ending and a notion of queer joy for her.

In the novel, Georgia frequently references romance tropes and different kinds of romantic texts she consumes, an aspect that invites an investigation of how the novel employs forms of metafiction through the use of a "genre-savvy protagonist" who possesses extensive knowledge about the exact literary genre they themselves are part of (Henderson, "Genre-savvy Protagonists"). Georgia is thus a fictional character/narrator in this young adult novel – yet Oseman specifically wrote *Loveless* as "a book that reflect[s] [their] own experiences and feelings about being aro-ace" ("An Interview"). Oseman also names Georgia as one of their characters they see themselves most in and admit to working through "a lot of really dark feelings and things [they]'d gone through," pointing towards the autofictional elements in the novel. I argue that the metafictional employment of romance and the autofictional construction of aro-ace identity in *Loveless* create a balance between (genre-) self-aware fiction and authenticity, joining in a narrative that constructs identifying as aro-ace as an ultimately joyful queer experience. Hereby, the book offers an authentic, yet dreamy, reading that is full of hope for aro-ace readers, subverts heteronormative romance tropes and broadens notions of love and joy for all its readers.

To develop this complex argument around the novel's use of narrational tools in its representation of asexuality and aromanticism and portrayal of queer joy, I will firstly define metafiction and autofiction. Next, another theoretical chapter will introduce asexuality, aromanticism, and my understanding of queer joy. After having established the terminology, the first part of my analysis will focus on the interplay of metafiction, genre-awareness, and romance tropes in *Loveless.* The following section then aims to extrapolate and analyze the construction of Georgia and her older cousin Ellisas asexual autofictional selves of Oseman by drawing comparisons between the author and the two characters. Lastly, the analysis will connect all observed aspects to an overarching theme of queer joy in the novel.

Metafiction and Autofiction

Before analyzing the terms metafiction, autofictional narration, asexuality, and queer joy in *Loveless*, they need to be defined. Following the definition of metafiction as brought forward by *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, I will consider the novel as metafictonal in the ways in which it "seems preoccupied by its own fictionality or with the nature of fiction generally" ("Metafiction" 431). Similarly, Monika Fludernik defines metafiction as "self-reflexive statements about the inventedness of the story" (28), and Svend Erik Larsen speaks of "semiotic self-reference" that "enables us … to question how the text is anchored and produced as a subjectivized

[1] Alice Oseman uses both she/her and they/them pronouns. To honor their identity, this paper will alternate between both sets of pronouns while maintaining the use of one form to one sentence to avoid unnecessary confusion.

semiotic system in a historical and material world" (25). In other words, metafiction refers to formal elements in a fictional narrative that point towards the fact that the narrative is indeed fictional. There are some 'typical' techniques that metafictional texts often employ, e.g., letting the authors themselves appear as characters that write the novel or having characters realize that they are in a novel ("Metafiction" 431). While *Loveless* does not employ any of these techniques, the novel has metafictional elements, instances where it "disrupts the illusion" of accessing a real world ("Metafiction" 431) and points towards its own fictionality – moments which will be elaborated on in the upcoming analysis.

However, the novel employs not only metafictional elements but can also be understood as autofiction. Related to autobiography, the term autofiction was coined by French author and critic Serge Doubrovsky to describe his own novels (see Ferreira-Meyers, "Autobiography and Autofiction"; "Does Autofiction"). Karen Ferreira-Meyers rephrases his definition of autofiction as "the term used to describe a narrative which has a strictly autobiographical subject matter …, but whose manner, that is the narrative organization and stylistic craft, is novel-like" ("Does Autofiction" 28). Autofiction can thus be understood as a blend of fiction and autobiography – a narrative based on real people that is not bound to the need of recounting true events like an autobiography would be (Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction" 31; see also Spear 358). However, there are different definitions, among both scholars and authors, of what exactly autofiction is (Ferreira-Meyers, "Autobiography and Autofiction" 203). Thomas Spear argues that the term generally encompasses a broad spectrum of "fictive distortions of documentable 'reality'" (357) and is applicable to "many novels where the author's personal history and identity is associated with that of a clearly fictional persona" (358). As will be further elaborated, *Loveless* does not fulfill all of the typical characteristics often listed for autofiction, but incorporates one central element of autofiction, namely "multiple identities" (Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction" 36). An autobiography claims to portray reality, conveyed by a completely honest author and their reliable narration (Gronemann 240). However, while both autobiography and autofiction aim to convey the truth (Ferreira-Meyers, "Autobiography and Autofiction" 210), only autobiography requires accuracy. Authors of autofiction often deviate from recounting events in their lives exactly how they remember them (213). Ferreira-Meyers formulates this distinction as the autofictional pact "that articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but sincere; s/he will lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice" ("Does Autofiction" 28). Thus, autofiction is more authentic than plain fiction and aims to portray truths about life. In contrast to autobiography and fiction, it is a highly ambiguous genre (or mode of writing) that mixes its textual and paratextual signals about fiction and reality (Ferreira-Meyers, "Autobiography and Autofiction" 212), but it also allows for sincerity and for inserting the self into writing without exposing private information of others (208-209). The autofictional pact and inherent ambiguity of autofictional writing also ensures that it is not always clear what is an autobiographical fact and what is fiction (or what lies in between); simultaneously, it still ensures the reader that the text is essentially authentic and contains truth. Autofiction also does not strive to cover a whole life and the life in question does not necessarily have to be that of a famous person or one marked by extraordinary circumstances (Ferreira Meyers, "Autobiography and Autofiction" 214). This allows autofiction to tell previously unheard stories and convey fragments of the, perhaps astoundingly ordinary, lives of all kinds of authors ("Does Autofiction" 32). *Loveless*, centering on the asexual self in a heteronormative environment, adds another facet to this already diverse mode of life writing beyond autobiography.

Asexuality, Aromanticism, and Queer Joy

Since asexuality and aromanticism are the central themes of Oseman's novel, as well as two of the main aspects that tie the author and their autofictional selves together, it is important to understand what those terms entail and how the aro-ace label functions in defining a distinct sexual identity. While there are many competing definitions of asexuality (Cerankowski and Milks 658), I will work with Anthony Bogaert's, which holds that "that asexuality is construable as a lack of sexual attraction or a lack of interest in others" (363). It is important to distinguish between sexual and romantic attraction, as some asexual people identify as heteroromantic/homoromantic/ biromantic, while others also identify as aromantic (4; see also Chasin 407). Additionally, not all asexual people completely abstain from sexual activity (Brunning and McKeever 497) and decisions to enter romantic (and/or sexual) relationships vary among asexual people (Chasin 407). Thus, the term 'asexual' refers to a broader range of people than it might at first appear.

For some time, asexuality has been overlooked or seen as pathological (Cerankowski and Milks 653). However, recent research stresses that asexuality should not be seen as a medical condition (Chasin 405). Instead, asexuality is now considered a distinct sexual identity or sexuality that is defined by the absence of sexual desire (Cerankowski and Milks 650). As such, asexuality (and aromanticism) fall under the umbrella term "queer," when the term is used to signal something other than the heteronormative norm (660). Julie Decker, who writes from a perspective within the asexual community, vehemently stresses this understanding of asexuality as a sexual identity:

> Asexuality isn't a complex. It's not a sickness. It's not an automatic sign of trauma. It's not a behavior. It's not the result of a decision. It's not a chastity vow or an expression that we are 'saving ourselves.' ... We aren't calling ourselves asexual because we failed to find a suitable partner. We aren't necessarily afraid of intimacy. And we aren't asking for anyone to 'fix' us. (3)

For members of the asexual community (Chasin 405; Bogaert 364) it is a matter of identity and sense of belonging to a community – like other queer labels.

This does not mean that asexual people do not struggle with their lack of sexual desire. Yet, as CJ DeLuzio Chasin convincingly argues, "if a person is upset about being asexual because ze lives in a world that is inhospitable to asexual people, we need to change the world, not the person"[2] (412). This is connected to compulsory sexuality – a concept that is related to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality (Grupta 133). Kristina Grupta argues that there is convincing evidence that societal norms go beyond pressuring people into heterosexuality, especially as the pressure to engage in sexual activity can be witnessed in sexual minority groups as well as heterosexual spaces (136). She uses compulsory sexuality to "describe the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe the social norms and practices" that implement these assumptions (132). As asexual (and aromantic) people diverge from the prevalent social norms surrounding sexuality, they are faced with discrimination, stigma, and pathologization (see Grupta 137-83; Bogaert 368; Chasin 405; Decker 3; Cerankowski and Milks 661).

As previously mentioned, aromanticism can correlate with asexuality (Cerankowski and Milks 651), and it remains important to keep aro-ace individuals in mind as a specific subsection of asexual people (Chasin 407). Yet, the term describes a separate queer identity and refers to another dimension of attraction, namely romantic feelings as opposed to sexual ones (see Tessler 2). As Hannah Tessler stresses, aromantic people might still experience sexual attraction to others,

[2] Chasin uses "ze," a gender neutral neo-pronoun, here to refer to asexual people of all genders.

yet aromanticism is often conceptually closely connected with asexuality (4). Centrally, aromantic people "experience low to no romantic attraction" (3) and thus they often defy societal expectations by focusing on platonic relationships instead of romantic connections (5). In this, scholars like Tessler see a "radical potential" to redefine and open up our understanding of relationships, family, and love (19).

Since they both defy societal norms of a monogamous, romantic, and heterosexual relationship as the ideal form of human connection, asexuality and aromanticism are widely considered part of the LGBTQIA+ community, with the letter 'A' representing asexuality. I understand the term queer as a similar umbrella term that encompasses all kinds of identities that diverge from the norm (Somerville 2). Literature in general can be a fruitful source of information and validation to all queer people, especially young adults, as they finally see their experiences represented (Town 15). However, portrayals that focus on violent encounters or discrimination similarly have the potential to "normalize … homophobia and violence against [queer] individuals" (15). Therefore, I agree with Caren Town who argues for moving away from narratives centered solely around the violence, struggles, and otherness of queer protagonists (16-17). Acknowledging the ongoing relevance of suffering as part of an authentic portrayal of queer experiences for queer audiences, Heather Love brings forward a nuanced argument about queer joy (55). Yet, she concedes that striving for queer happiness and joy remains a worthy goal, partly because the idea that being queer inherently leads to suffering and sadness is a part of anti-queer sentiments (62). I argue that both Town's and Love's arguments should be considered, and that neither a sole focus on queer suffering nor a forced narrative of happiness are favorable in representations of queerness. In the following analysis, I will therefore explore both the presence of pain and of queer – or more precisely aromantic asexual – joy, and how they relate to the metafictional and autofictional elements present in the narration.

Metafiction and Romance Tropes in *Loveless*

In *Loveless,* metafiction enters the narrative in the form of genre and genre awareness. Henderson observes this self-awareness about genre in this book and similar novels, focusing their argument on protagonists who intertextually reference "classic rom-coms" and display an intense awareness about romance "tropes and genre conventions" ("Genre-savvy Protagonists"). This awareness about genre that *Loveless*'s protagonist and first-person narrator Georgia displays is a form of metafiction because it signals to readers that the text is a fictional romance narrative that exists in a broad context of genre and conventions. Henderson observes something similar, as she argues that queer protagonists in romance novels have a potential to initiate "metatextual conversations" ("Genre-savvy Protagonists"). One of the most poignant instances of metafiction occurs at the very start of *Loveless*. The novel's second chapter, titled "Romance," interrupts the narrative and pace of the first chapter – which starts in medias res at Georgia's prom afterparty. The chapter does not continue with narrating the events of this night, but instead reflects on Georgia's obsession with romance. This chapter cannot be placed properly in terms of story time – instead, it operates outside of the novel's mostly chronological narrative. In a string of parallelisms, the chapter introduces all the things Georgia obsesses over: "I loved romance. I loved Disney …. I loved fanfiction" (Oseman 8) ending this list with making one thing clear: "[she] just. Loved. Love" (8). The parallelism and repetition of "love" mark Georgia's obsession with the concept of love, and the insistent presence of the word stands in contrast to the novel's title. Linguistically, *Loveless* is indeed full of love from the beginning.

While Georgia dreams of finding romantic love herself, she also shows metafictional awareness of the constructedness of romance tropes, for example when she justifies her relative inexperience in those sectors with the assertion that "teen romances only work […] out in movies anyway" (Oseman 9). In another chapter, Georgia makes a similar observation, as she states that "if [their] lives were in a movie, at least two of [her and her two best friends] would have got together" (12). Instances like these are metafictional because they serve as reminders that this novel, too, is fiction ("Metafiction" 431; Fludernik 28; Larsen 25) and employs the same tropes that its protagonist frequently references and judges as the stuff of fiction. Georgia's "Romance" reflection ends with her strong belief in "finding the one" and having a "happily ever after" (Oseman 9), indicating how the metafictional romance tropes become part of the novel's narrative as well. This allows for two opposing readings regarding the novel's ending. Firstly, it can be seen as a sad foreshadowing of the fact that Georgia will never be able to have what she imagines a love story should be. However, if one follows the novel's premise, "*Loveless* … rejects the very idea that there is no love in a story without a romance plot" (Henderson, "Alice Oseman and"), and thus Georgia's internal monologue in fact teases the unconventional fulfillment of her wishes for romance.

The novel sets up genre tropes early on and lets its protagonist/narrator reflect on them throughout the novel. Towards its ending, *Loveless* implements two romance tropes: an over-the top romantic gesture and an elaborate love declaration, both of which are expressions of platonic love. Georgia's big romantic gesture is directed towards one of her long-time best friends, Pip, and serves as both an apology and a proposal for her to be her 'college wife' – a tradition at Durham University where older students form a (in most cases platonic) couple that will mentor incoming younger students together. For this, she enlists the help of other friends to perform "Your Song" from the film *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) – while standing on a rented boat, surprising Pip as she crosses a bridge. Georgia reflects on the elaborateness of the gesture, stating that "there was absolutely no need to do this from a boat other than for dramatic effect" (Oseman 369). She also calls this an "elaborate platonic gesture" (369), employing an obvious word play on "romantic gestures." Additionally, Georgia does not develop this plan on her own; instead, she simply re-enacts what Pip describes herself at the very beginning of the book:

> "You know what I want?" Pip said, as we stumbled into Hattie's conservatory and collapses on a sofa.
> "What?" I said.
> "I want someone to spontaneously perform a song to declare their love for me."
> "What song?"
> She gave this some thought.
> "'Your Song' from Moulin Rouge." (6)

Georgia deliberately creates a moment for Pip that is based on Pip's fantasies – which are influenced by romance tropes. By including the conversation between Pip and Georgia, the novel acknowledges the deliberateness of the gesture, and metafictionally points towards *Loveless* being fictional and full of romance tropes as well.

The other trope, a declaration of love, is a counterpart to Georgia's gesture, this time with her on the receiving end as her college roommate Rooney confesses her – strictly platonic but deep – feelings for her. This happens in a chapter titled "Grand Gesture" – which shows self-awareness of the tropes it employs. Right before the declaration, Georgia confesses how afraid she is to lose her friends as "[she is] never going to have that one special person" (Oseman 412) – a romantic

partner. In a pivotal moment, it is Rooney who questions societal norms about love, as she insists that she can and wants to be "that person" for Georgia. Georgia then insists that this "is not how the world works" as "people always put romance over friendship" – too which Rooney boldly replies: "Says who? … The heteronormative rulebook? Fuck that, Georgia. Fuck that" (412-13). This moment portrays again that *Loveless* is indeed "preoccupied by its own fictionality" ("Metafiction" 431) as it employs the tropes of romance narratives – in the form of a dramatic conversation at the end of the narrative in which two people confess their feelings to each other – while openly addressing how theses tropes are part of heteronormativity. *Loveless* continues to employ tropes and typical wordings from romance fiction and films. Rooney delivers a long speech to Georgia, during which she tells her that she "feel[s] at home around [Georgia]" and that Georgia "changed [her] … fucking saved [her]" (Oseman 413) – altogether combining many of romance's most exaggerated ways to declare one's romantic feelings. One very metafictional sentence in her monologue declares that "this is a fucking love story!" (413).

Overall, the metafictional awareness of genre in *Loveless* has the effect of pointing to the fictionality of the novel and destroying the illusion that reading the novel is a 'door to reality.' In combination with Georgia's obsession with exactly these romance tropes in the very beginning of the novel, the two moments at the end of *Loveless* are metafictional as they remind readers of the constructedness of the whole narrative. As a result, *Loveless* caters to the same fantasy that romance always creates, yet the book still reminds readers of the tropes that construct these fantasies in the first place. By using the tropes, pointing actively to the constructedness of these 'romantic' moments, but then also applying them to atypical situations, namely friendships, the novel spotlights the heteronormativity of classic romance tropes to then subvert them. This subversion is connected to the asexuality and aromanticism portrayed in the novel, since the ending shows a "revised, queered love story formula" (Henderson, "Genre-savvy Protagonists") – by spotlighting platonic love.

Aro-Ace Autofictional Selves in *Loveless*

Georgia's aro-ace identity not only informs the revised romance tropes in *Loveless*, it is also one of the central aspects that ties her to Oseman and thus establishes the autofictional relationship between author and protagonist in this novel. Oseman talks about this connection in an interview, stating that "one of the reasons I wanted to write *Loveless* was because although I'd read several books that featured aro and ace characters, the feelings and experiences in those books weren't things [they] could particularly relate to" ("An Interview"). She wrote the book to "reflect […] [her] own experiences and feelings about being aro-ace" – meaning that while Georgia and Oseman do not share a name, Georgia can still be constructed as an autofictional self of Oseman, especially when following Spear's understanding of autofiction as books in which the "author's personal history and identity is associated with that of a clearly fictional persona" (358). Additionally, there are biographical facts about Oseman that can be found within *Loveless*' story. For example, Oseman studied at Durham University, and learned about asexuality at the university ("An Interview") – both striking parallels to Georgia's story. Another connection to Georgia can be found in what Oseman says about her own struggles with accepting her asexuality. She was also wondering if she was, in fact, gay or growing up with the belief she "would find 'the one' and get married some day" ("Alice Oseman on").

Georgia's autofictional connection to Oseman thus relies heavily on both of them being aro-ace. Following the idea of the autofictional pact, there is no bulletproof way to distinguish what

is fact and what is fiction in *Loveless*. However, based on what Oseman says about their experiences and their motivation for writing the book, moments of explicit aro-ace experiences can be assumed to be largely based on autobiographical facts. One of those moments occurs when Georgia tries to kiss Tommy, whom she has fabricated a crush on. When he leans in, she is "hit" with "a wave of absolute, unbridled disgust" (Oseman 25-26). Georgia also reports exactly what kind of affects go through her in this situation, detailing how "[she] want[s] to smash a glass and throw up at the same time" and that Tommy's proximity "feel[s] horrific" (26). In this vulnerable and confusing moment, the protagonist also questions her own reaction, concisely formulated in the careful question: "that wasn't normal, was it?" (26). Here, protagonist and author clearly merge, as this questioning resonates completely with what Oseman writes about herself, namely that "I felt very alone and wondered whether there was something wrong with me" ("Alice Oseman on"). It is impossible for readers, and me, to know whether this exact scenario ever happened in Oseman's life – but it does not matter, as it is the essence of feeling repelled by romantic/sexual proximity that marks Georgia as an autofictional self here. Indeed, Oseman can be "not honest, but sincere" and "lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice" (Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction" 28), and this short moment in *Loveless* is a sincere attempt to reflect the 'world' of internal struggles of an aro-ace person. The passage and many others in *Loveless* also exemplify the effects of compulsory sexuality (Grupta 133). Aro-ace people like Oseman and Georgia clearly suffer because they grew up with the assumption that only a life with sexuality is normal – and therefore valuable and desirable.

Georgia is not the only version of Oseman to be found in *Loveless*. Towards the end of the book, Georgia spends Christmas with her family, including her older cousin Ellis. Not only is Ellis also clearly marked as an aro-ace character, but she even shares her first name with Alice Oseman, at least phonetically. Additionally, she is an artist, a profession not far away from Oseman's, who works as an author and comic book illustrator. This arguably turns her into an even more typical autofictional person than Georgia, as a shared first name is often cited as one of the markers of autofiction (Ferreira-Meyers. "Does Autofiction" 36). Rather than dismissing the autofictional link between Georgia and Oseman in favor of Ellis, however, I read the cousins as split selves of Oseman, and consequently their conversation as a younger and older version of Oseman talking to each other. Yet, before Georgia and Ellis discuss their shared (sexual) identity, Georgia is witness to Ellis's suffering under the total lack of understanding by her parents. During this fight, Ellis's parents make use of ideas rooted in compulsory sexuality and pathologize their daughter. Georgia witnesses Auntie Sal asking Ellis a series of questions about the future: "What will your life be like when you're Gran's age, without a partner, without children? Who is going to be there to support you? You'll have no one" (Oseman 309). Through the repetition of 'without' and the stressing of 'no one,' it becomes evident that Sal operates under the assumption – formed under the ideals of compulsory sexuality – that only a partner and children can bring long lasting happiness and companionship. Although Ellis defends her life choices – for example, by rightfully asserting that "[she] can still do amazing things with [her] life" (309) – her parents resort to pathologizing her lack of interest in dating, marriage, and motherhood by suggesting "trying therapy again" (309). This mirrors assumptions often made about asexual and/or aromantic people, namely that their lack of interest in those kinds of connections is a disorder (Grupta 132).

The conversation Georgia and Ellis have about their shared aro-ace identity tackles the pain and confusion they both experience due to being different to most of the other people in their lives. Interestingly, they both help each other by offering two different parts of acceptance: one personal lived experience of happiness and the other understanding of aro-ace identities and the

community. Although Ellis confesses that she sometimes believes her parents and wonders if her life indeed is worth less because she will never have a romantic life partner (Oseman 313), she ultimately offers Georgia a positive outlook into the future. Ellis recounts her long journey to self-acceptance, in words that closely mirror Georgia's – another hint pointing to their construction as split selves of Oseman. For example, Ellis describes "this underlying feeling of wrongness[, a]lmost disgust" (315), that always came up whenever she tried to experience romance or sex – the same disgust that Georgia feels when she forces herself to kissing Tommy at the beginning of the book. However, like Oseman themself, Ellis "[is] older now" and explains to Georgia that "friendship can be just as intense, beautiful and endless as romance" and that "there's love everywhere around [her]" (316). Ellis has already accepted what Georgia still has to learn: she is far from being loveless and does not have to be hopeless. What Georgia then offers to Ellis is both the terminology and a sense of community when she tells her older cousin that "it's a real sexuality" that many people identify with (317). It becomes apparent that this is news for Ellis who tells her younger cousin that "[she's] … very lucky to know all of this" (317; ellipsis in original). When reading Georgia and Ellis as two versions of Oseman, this means that accepting her sexuality needs both parts – learning about the terms and community in college and finding contentedness in an unusual lifestyle over years. In fact, Oseman details similar steps in their own journey: first finding out about the terms, taking time to accept that they apply to them, and lastly "imagining another path for [their] future" ("Alice Oseman on"). Ellis' final advice to Georgia consequently reads like Oseman giving out the advice she wishes she could give her younger self: "Give your friendships the magic you would give a romance" (Oseman 318).

While the metafictional elements in *Loveless* point to the tropes employed and the fictional nature of the book, the autofictional selves found in both Georgia and Ellis testify how sincere the text is about Oseman and their very real experiences as an aro-ace young adult and adult. Of course, exactly which parts of the narrative are narrating autobiographical facts remains uncertain, yet it is clear to readers who also engage with Oseman as a person and know of their own aro-ace identity that the author is sincere about their experiences and tries to tell truths about life as an aro-ace person in a heteronormative world (Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction" 28). This includes Georgia and Ellis facing self-doubt and ignorance – experiences that are detailed as common among asexual people (Grupta 137-83; Bogaert 367-68; Chasin 405; Decker 3; Cerankowski and Milks 661) and are closely connected to notions of compulsory asexuality (Grupta). As autofictional selves of Oseman, both characters function as sincere representations of aro-ace individuals. This means that if there is truth in the pain, there is also truth in the joy and hope that Ellis represents and Georgia begins to find.

Hope, Queer Joy, and Love Beyond Romance

The presence of this joy, especially after also showing lack of acceptance and pain, counters the normalization of anti-queer violence and is thus important for young adult readers (see Town 16-17). In *Loveless*, queer joy enters the narrative in many forms, as Georgia and Ellis both find happiness in their aro-ace identity and other characters are shown to be happy with being pansexual or lesbian. Queer joy is also expressed through both metafiction and autofiction.

The romance tropes that are metafictionally reflected on and then used in the book culminate in a happy ending for Georgia. Romance is not entirely abandoned in *Loveless*, rather it is transformed for Georgia's needs, as the book insists on the presence of love even in the absence of a romance plot (Henderson, "Alice Oseman and"). This sentiment is also expressed within the

book when Rooney declares to Georgia that their friendship "is a fucking love story" (Oseman 413). Georgia is seemingly overwhelmed by the long speech about the love Rooney has for her, yet her flowing tears also express her happiness and she accepts Rooney's love (14-15). Both the speech itself and Georgia's very emotional reaction obviously feed into the romance tropes that Georgia is familiar with – making this one of the novel's strong metafictional moments. Furthermore, the love declaration realizes the kind of fantasy that Georgia, inspired by romance fiction, speculates on in the beginning of *Loveless*, sure that "[her] big love story would come" and "[she] would find the one" (9). Yet, it is completely different to what she imagined, as romantic love is superseded by platonic love. Henderson argues something similar when they state that "Georgia's quest shifts from 'finding love' to acknowledging and celebrating the love she already has in her life: the love between her and her friends" ("Alice Oseman and"). One could argue that the metafictional aspect of the happy ending diminishes the joy as shallow and unbelievable, but the twisting of the tropes renders the ending less fantastic while still retaining the joyful spark of a rom-com happy ending.

Additionally, the (queer) joy in *Loveless* is not only present in moments of metafiction, but also deeply rooted in autofiction. On a general level, the autofictional connection between Oseman and Georgia renders the happy ending more authentic and believable to readers. While it is unclear whether a love declaration like Rooney's ever took place in Oseman's life, the overall authenticity of Georgia's and Ellis' struggles renders the joy and abundance of platonic love more probable as well. More specifically, the conversation between Georgia and Ellis constitutes both a highly autofictional moment – with both of Oseman's selves in conversation – and a point in the book that offers a first glance at aro-ace joy. In the chapter, "Platonic Magic," Ellis tells Georgia that she is "not hopeless any more" (Oseman 316) after struggling with being different from her peers for years, and ensures her younger cousin that "[she has] a lot more love than some other people in the world" (316). This sends a clear message to Georgia and *Loveless*' readers: Life as an aro-ace person can be full of love and joy. When reading Ellis as an older version of Oseman, this is an assertion by the author that she herself is "not hopeless anymore." Ellis also reminds Georgia that her friendships are the key to finding joy and love in her life (318). When Georgia playfully tells her to put this sentiment into one of her paintings, Ellis agrees that she might – and she would "call it Platonic Magic" (318).

While Oseman wrote a book called *Loveless*, instead of painting an artwork called Platonic Magic, they created something that speaks of the joy and love found in friendships, arguably not only for aro-ace people. This message of hope and joy is also spread among different characters within *Loveless*. When Georgia attends an event of the Pride Society at her university, she is the one that reminds her friend Sunil, who also identifies as asexual, that "[he] deserve[s] joy" (332). Sunil, as president of the Pride Society, then delivers a speech to the gathered queer students during which he picks up that sentiment. He reminds everyone that the most important asset of their meetings is not overtly engaging with their queerness or using the community as a pool for dating, but "the relationships [they] form" – "friendship, love and support while [they're] all trying to survive and thrive in a world that often doesn't feel like it was made for [them]" (335). At the end of his speech, everyone toasts to his last sentence which is the crucial reminder Georgia gave him before: "And we all deserve joy." The whole speech, though directed at the other fictional characters within the novel, reads like it is addressed to the readers as well, reminding them that they, too, deserve joy – whoever they are and however they identify. This joy is not tied to romantic relationships in any way – on the contrary, it lives in other connections like friendship. Henderson argues that this is an overarching theme of Oseman's books, which share the philosophy "that

friendships deserve the same narrative attention and the same emotional weight as a romantic plotline would" ("Alice Oseman and").

For Georgia, the journey to accepting this alternative way of love and joy is painful and full of mistakes. In fact, the speech by Sunil is one of the pivotal moments that changes her perspective on love. Yet it is not his words, but the joy and love she witnesses between him and his best friend Jess, that sparks something in her. When Sunil smiles at Jess, Georgia observes "genuine love in that gaze" and "fe[els] dazzled by it" (Oseman 335). After the end of the speech, Sunil and Jess embrace each other and Georgia realizes what she actually wants from life instead of the romance she thought she craved:

> That was it. That was what everything was about.
> The love in that hug. The knowing look between them.
> They had their own love story.
> That was what I wanted. … I used to dream of spellbinding,
> endless, forever romance. …
> But now, I realised, friendship could be that too. (335)

This moment occurs after Ellis gives her the advice to cherish her friendships, yet before Rooney assures her that they have "a fucking love story" (413). The hope offered to readers here is that one can look for – and find – different kinds of love. Moreover, this is another highly autofictional moment and echoes what Oseman says about her own journey of giving up on heteronormative assumptions about romantic love and how she "was able to start imagining …. [a] future filled with platonic love instead" ("Alice Oseman on"). Especially for aro-ace readers, having this hope for a joyful future is important and offers perspectives beyond the ongoing suffering that any queer person experiences in a heteronormative society influenced by compulsory sexuality (Town 15; Love 62).

Loveless ends with Georgia looking for a shared flat with her childhood best friends Pip and Jason, and her new close friends Rooney and Sunil (Oseman 428-29). The last chapter details the friends finding the house, touring it, and planning how to set it up. Standing there in her new home, Georgia begins to imagine her future and the happiness she will find in living with her best friends (432-33). This happy ending, portraying a realistic scenario of founding a shared flat, is astoundingly ordinary and unspectacular and thus grounds Georgia's story in a quiet kind of joy, especially after the extraordinary romantic gestures that border on unbelievable and superficial. The book's conclusion stands in total opposition to its title: instead of being loveless, Georgia finds herself in the middle of a life that is full of hope, joy, and love. And these friends, who are the source of an abundance of love in her life, are also shown to understand and accept her sexuality once she has figured it out and found the words to describe her experiences.

Conclusion

Loveless depicts and acknowledges the pain and confusion of asexual people, who "stand in contrast to a heterosexual majority" (Bogaert 7) in a society shaped by compulsory sexuality (Grupta). Georgia and Ellis – both autoficitonal selves of the author Alice Oseman – are shown to struggle internally with accepting themselves and finding contentment in the different kinds of lives they lead. Especially Ellis is also shown to face external obstacles on her journey to happiness as her parents pressure and pathologize her. Oseman themselves speak out about inserting "the dark

stuff" into the book because it reflects their own painful journey as an aro-ace person ("An Interview"). This can be linked to "the alienation that comes from lacking sexual desire in a world that presumes sexual desire and that attaches great power to sexuality" (Cerankowski and Milks 661), an alienation that asexual people experience on a regular basis, as well as to various forms of more direct oppression (Cerankowski and Milks 661; Decker 3; Chasin 418; Bogaert 368; Grupta 136-38).

Following Love's arguments on queer happiness, it remains important to acknowledge this kind of suffering in queer stories (55). However, *Loveless* does not dwell on suffering but progresses to joy and hope. As my analysis has shown, this queer joy is closely connected to both the metafictional insertion (and transformation) of romance tropes and the presence of autofictional selves. Some of the most overtly joyful moments are those in which Georgia functions as a "genre-savvy LGBTQIA+ rom-com [heroine]" who inspires "metatextual conversations" (Henderson, "Genre-Savvy Protagonists"). Other moments of joy occur in the form of autofiction: When both autofictional selves discuss their shared experiences, for example, or when Ellis offers a hopeful and joyful outlook on the future to the younger Georgia in a moment of autofictional sincerity.

This book, and its authentic and optimistic outlook on life as an aro-ace person, offers crucial hope to asexual and/or aromantic readers as it depicts more than the discrimination and hurt associated with being queer (Town 16-17). As Henderson details, *Loveless* and other works by Oseman are widely appreciated by aro-ace readers for their relatability and hopefulness ("Alice Oseman and"). Additionally, authentic representations of asexuality add to asexual visibility on a broader scale and counters "everyday erasure and denigration which continues to harm asexual people" (Brunning and McKeever 498); along similar lines, Grupta argues for adding "sympathetic […] representations" of asexual people to various media (148). Even when looking beyond asexuality and aromanticism, the book can offer something personal to its readers. The platonic love that Georgia experiences is, after all, not one sided but also brings joy to her friends, who are not asexual. All of *Loveless*' central characters "end up all the happier for their acknowledgment that there are many different types of love, not dependent on the usual expectations of romantic and sexual relationships" (Henderson, "Alice Oseman and"). Ultimately, the queer love in *Loveless*, albeit especially important for addressing aro-ace readers and for furthering asexual representation, can offer joy and hope for anyone willing to seek out "Platonic Magic" (Oseman 318) in their lives.

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Summer 2024

Independent Studies: Poetry Workshop

Introduction: Poetry Workshop

Mandana Vahebi

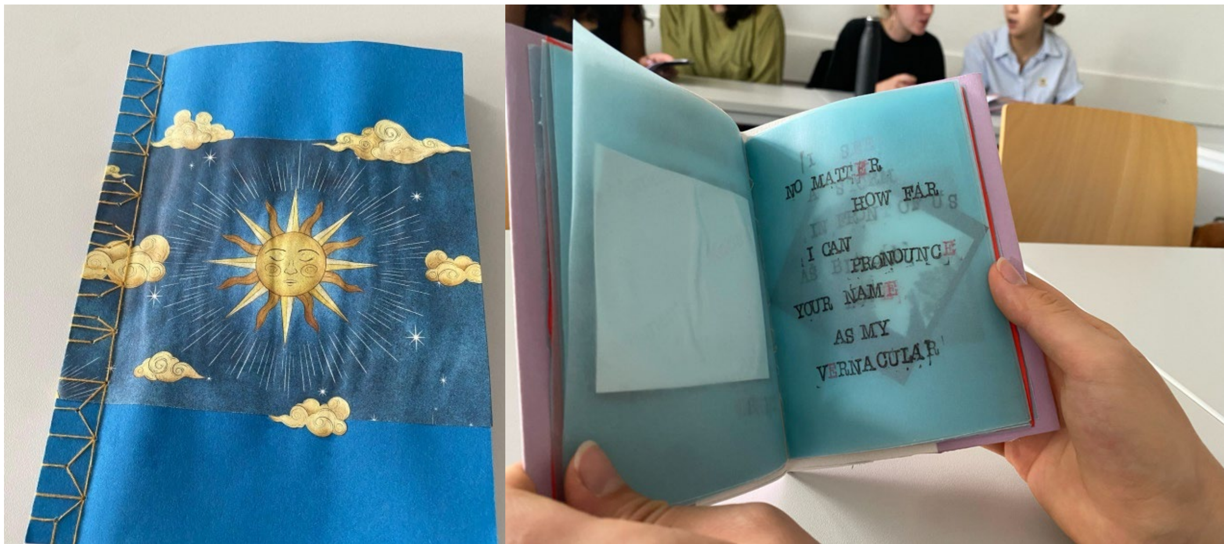

Figure 1. Bound book by Charlie Geitlinger (left) and Mandana Vahebi (right), photos by Sarah Willeford.

> "*Poetry is When an Emotion Has Found its Thought and the Thought has Found Words.*"
> – Robert Frost

You wake up, clean your face, look in the mirror, get dressed, phone in one hand, coffee in the other, and your day unfolds. You drift through social media, absorb the news, carry the miseries of humanity with you. You delve into a book, attend a seminar, and engage in diverse conversations with loved ones, friends, or everyday strangers. Your past haunts you and a multitude of external and internal stimuli stir emotions within you. Emotions, thoughts, more emotions, then thoughts again, silence, a sense of being overwhelmed, or perhaps a moment of mindfulness: You are bearing a fruit of your own. It would then be necessary to bring the absorption of these emotions and ideas into a form. In this way one can develop a self-awareness of how life works as a whole, how one deals with emotions and how all this leads to an appreciation and recognition of life. Poetry is one such form, one that gives access to a reflective feedback – an artistic tool that can help to coordinate and navigate the everyday, language, and its functions, to make sense of our feelings and ideas.

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In celebration of a genre that stands on its own and lends its stimulation to our daily lives, a poetry workshop was held by Abigail Fagan in the 2023 summer term. The aim was to create a generative and friendly critical climate through the sharing and discussion of poetry, a working knowledge of poetic terms and genres, and an informal database of methods and places for publishing poetry – including in the form of homemade chapbooks. Each meeting of the course had three activities: a discussion of poems that provided models or guidelines for our own writing; time to respond to a writing prompt; and a workshop on poems written by the students. The final meetings of the semester were devoted to bringing a selection of poems written during the semester into some kind of material form. In the final session, poets from Abby Fagan's seminar presented their work to students from Ilka Brasch's seminar "Form, Materiality, Archive," taught in the same semester. This encounter across disciplines allowed for a rich exchange of ideas. In addition to sharing their poems, the poets presented their chapbooks, which varied in color, binding, and design. Participants discussed how these physical attributes affected the reading experience. This interaction sparked insightful dialogues about the interplay between form and content, underscoring the notion that the physicality of a book can significantly enhance or alter its meaning. The workshop emphasized poetry as a collective, reflective activity, combining the acts of reading and writing with an appreciation of the material aspects of publication.

Figure 2. Students reading through the poetry books, photos by Sarah Willeford.

Some of the poetry produced in the context of Abigail Fagan's "Poetry Workshop" seminar is now collected in this issue. There are nine poems with a wide range of topics which are presented in the following order: "Shiraz is in the Heart" by Shayan Rahmanian Koushkaki, followed by a second poem by the same poet "trilingual," "The Bare Minimum" by Lena Schröder and "Words, Inherited I and II" by Charlie Geitlinger. Sarah Willeford also published two poems, namely "The Quilt," followed by "13 Ways of Looking at an Altoids Tin." And lastly, "Bathroom Prayers" by Aenne Dirks, "Pleasure in Pain" by Nientke Peters, and "On the Bar" by Mandana Vahebi conclude all nine poems in this issue.

Author Biography

Mandana Vahebi is currently pursuing a master's degree in the division of North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Arak University, Iran. Her academic interests span a wide range of fields, including cultural studies, transnationalism, poetics, affect studies, and media, film, and communication. In her current role as associate editor at the *In Progress* journal at Leibniz University Hannover, Mandana has applied her specialized skills in video essay creation to supply compelling and informative video content in the journal's latest issue.

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Shiraz is in the heart

Shayan Rahmanian Koushkaki

. . .
Born into saturnine secrecy,
oh Hafez-e-joonam, how you've been
quashed. I know it's for the better. Pressured to assimilate
although two parallels can't meet.
Perpetually discounted, you, the lesser homolog
are the eternally same other, eclipsed for centuries.
yes, I shall stay in exile, banished from the city of the father-poet, I
know it's for the better

And yet I dream
of a world where I write
these lines in my mother tongue,
One where I don't execute
the white man's battery of my mother's tongue.
No it's for the better.

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trilingual

Shayan Rahmanian Koushkaki

tenderness
does not come easy to us. we default
to rage, for him for her for them for us.
nevereverending thymos.
incapable of apathy or moderation,
i am an amalgamation of wrath anger fury hostility bitterness.
as we struggle to spell love
all we learn is to lacerate overpower vituperate erode.

Oh Saturn,
I am in sempiternal competition with
one
hundred
sixteen
other moons,
gravitating around you, from afar.

vây aziz, drei sprachen and still no words.
put on that movie you like, first
just let me cut some fruit
for you.

Author Biography

Shayan Rahmanian Koushkaki (he/him) is a master student in two separate degrees, North American Studies and New German Literary Studies, at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). He has a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as his major and German as his minor subject. His bachelor thesis, "Redpilling Anons and Trolling Normies: On Politically Incorrect Online Discourses of the Alt-Right" investigates the discursive weaponization of online hate-speech and memes into affect and alternative truth-making. Shayan also co-authored a paper in an anthology at the German Wehrhahn Verlag for literary and cultural studies titled "Kanon und Kanonisierung im Vereinigten Königreich und den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika." In his studies, he particularly focuses on postmigration, literary antisemitism, film studies, settler colonial studies, and Black feminist critique of popular culture. Additionally, Shayan is also an organizational member of the Decolonial Feminisms Reading Group as well as a founding editor of *In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies* and continues to contribute to the journal.

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the bare minimum

Lena Schroeder

Welcome to this space where
Inaction leads to the
Difference in sentience
Of what it takes
Is it just our burden to bear?

Already an achievement
When those
Doing the bare minimum of
sensibility
awareness
criticism
Reflection
Get credit
Expression of fragility

Why are we upholding
Impossible standards to ourselves
To our queerness to our feminism
To our moral and political race
But excuse the bare

Don't take it personal
Don't make it about you
They are trying to give their best
The bare excuse.

When it leads to 24
When it leads to
Disempowerment
And disembodiment
But who are you
When there's all to mend

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And when I listen into myself
The wound is still there
But it is not as sharp
And my mind not as
dark
Anymore.

And now relationships like these
Feel like the best possible excuse
In a world so confusing
When will it be seen?

Author Biography

Lena Schroeder (she/her) is a master's student in North American Studies at the Philosophische Fakultät of Leibniz Universität Hannover (LUH). She changed disciplines after completing her bachelor's degree at the University of Bremen, transitioning from Sociology to Literature to concentrate more on gender, queer, and postcolonial studies. Her poem "the bare minimum" was composed and submitted in the Independent Studies class "Poetry Workshop," instructed by Abigail Fagan.

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Words, Inherited I

Charlie Anton Geitlinger

my joints creak around the letters, reverberating in the atriums of my heart
crescendoing into the deafening chorus[1] of those who came before and those not yet born
their voices rattle through my ribs and vibrate down my arm, pulsate in the tips of my fingers and finally
they
spill onto the page[2] in jagged lines that connect us across the unbridgeability of time and violence
ink armours | encrusts my fingers
and yet it cannot muffle the strike of unheard agony that transcends the confines of paper
even when the words have dried, they remain, just like our existence,
ever in transit[3]

[1] Caelee & Diamond & Destiny
[2] Paul & Chrysanthemum & Andrea
[3] No'eau & Chloë & Sophie

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Words, Inherited II

Charlie Anton Geitlinger

another has left us today and in their place, another fissure in the mountain of my heart
breathlessly, I search the ache that seeks to fill this cavern, hoping to identify the
catastrophic cacophony of voices echoing across all of time.
doubt is drowned out by the pressure powering the sprinkler in the lawn of my soul and I
write
ever more words to stem this tidal wave that is and isn't mine,
failing all over to recognize that my omnipresent unheard sisterbrothersiblings won't be un-
listened to anymore. this is the burden we carry to-
gether, dead alive not-yet-born
hey! hey!
hey hey hey! Macho-Machoman![4]
I've got to be a mouthpiece megaphone for us and before I can yell about our
joy, our hurt needs to be heard. It's the immediacy of this death and the diffuse bone-deep
soreness of
knowing that death is our past present future but so is
love ?

mirrors embedded in my skin refract the light that shines on our body
never and always alone, our physical contact transported through time and space
offers increments of relief in the form of chains of
peptides that briefly inhibit our receptors but truthfully, it alleviates nothing and yet, my heart
quickens at the prospect of such profound connection.

release only comes by blood-letting my
soul, piercing it with the nib of my pen and letting it drain onto
the page, destined to be filled with shimmering rivers of
unshed tears manifesting in cosmic dust which settles in the
vacant chambers of my heart
Where have you all gone? Let us build a home with
xenoliths so that we may encompass each other entirely as we have
yearned for, always. In the hope that we may eventually birth the
zygote of a future unseen, unfelt,[5] unthought, awaited.

[4] Rose, Chloë a.k.a. B'ellana Johannx. *B'ellana Johannx's Satanic Verses: Book 1: The Fire Principle, Or A Guidebook for the New Transfaggot*. Dream Pop Press,2019, p. 26.
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Author Biography

Charlie Anton Geitlinger (they/them) is a master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). They hold a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Performing Arts as second subject. Their bachelor thesis, "Man, Woman, Jellyfish: Construction and Performance of Gender in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*" investigates the transformative potential of rewriting plays with cult status in congruence with contemporary attitudes and the original's essence. In their studies in the North American Studies and Teacher Training master programs, they focus particularly on gender studies, settler colonial studies, transformative fiction, and queer studies. Charlie is a member of the Decolonial Feminisms Reading Group. A selection of their poetry was published under the title *increments of relief*.

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The Quilt

Sarah Willeford

my earliest memory is The Mother's hands
Her pale, calloused, dexterous hands
            pulled, cut, pinned, and stitched
stitched from the corpses of mismatched, long-dead
cloth And created a miasma of patterns and textures;
that should not blend but do

The Mother gives me to The Girl.
The Girl's hands are small delicate bird-like
things she is, as I, am: new untouched by
bleaching light

for The Girl, I am a rainbow of
possibility a shield from the dark, a
weapon of justice, and castle
stronghold

The Girl becomes The Women
The Women's hands are no longer untouched
calloused, wrinkled yet strong, dependable

for The Women, I am a tool
forgotten in the dark until needed
providing comfort when
remembered

The Woman becomes The Mother
and I am given to The Girl

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13 ways of looking at an Altoids tin

Sarah Willeford

1
The lingering scent of cool peppermint in the stale world of my purse
is created by air leaking out of an Altoids tin Gifted then promptly forgotten

2
it's not working oh, how you want it to work you try, boy howdy, do you try to make it work
you are the only one trying everyone else gave up long ago it's time you gave up too
it's as likely to work as becoming a millionaire painting Altoids tins and selling them on Etsy

3
An Altoids tin is like a Gothic European Cathedral
Decorated with ornate swirls and whorls but hollow; empty
Lacking the substance that filled it and gave it its original purpose

4
His eyes were open but
unseeing corpse empty like
the Altoids tin on the window

5
The forest is dense; oppressive; unending
But I have no fear of straying from the path
The flint in my Altoids tin saves me from the dark

6
If flight is an Altoids tin,
I am the mint
And the endless expanse of Sky, through which I'm passing,
Is the back left pants pocket of a grandfather's pair of Wranglers

7
when she is with me I am full
bursting with color and
excitement but she is not often
with me the door closes the
lock clicks once again I am
alone an empty Altoids tin

8
You're the Poly Pocket in the Altoids tin
    "A bit too old for that outfit, hmm?"
    "Why not try these shoes?"
    "Aren't you embarrassed in *that*?"
Your mother is the child playing god

9
If you ever want to find love look for the boy who
carries his amp in an Altoids tin you won't need
to entertain him he is resourceful and has his
own hobbies

10
we are going on
hour four
it should be quiet, perhaps not peaceful but at least, content It
is not content. The cry of the child is shrill; piercing; ear-
splitting like a banjo made from an Altoids tin and Satan's
shoelaces

11
Bones are not supposed to make that sound.
Nor are they supposed to fold the way yours currently are.
    Looks a bit like an Altoids tin that my cousin Jerrold's fat dog ate once.
You should probably call someone about that.

12
You don't know if you want this
She wants this
How can you say no
You don't want to give her up
The world moves
A forgotten tin of Altoids digs into your back

13
Forgive me
For I can only see the outside of your Altoids tin
And I made an assumption
That the inside of yours looked like the inside of mine

Author Biography

Sarah Willeford (she/her) is a 2023 Graduate of the University of Georgia, in the United States. She attended Leibniz University, in Hannover, Germany, for duration of the 2022-2023 academic year. Sarah holds a bachelor's degree in Linguistics with a special focus in Second Language Acquisition. She also has minors in the German Language and Teaching English to Students of Other Languages. In addition to her linguistic pursuits, Sarah, has a multifaceted skill set that includes literary writing and analysis, public speaking, and relationship building. Sarah is currently pursuing a law degree in the United States.

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Bathroom Prayers

Aenne Dirks

You tend to pray in the
bathroom. That's where it feels
right, you tell me.
Wet hair cooling your shoulders, toothbrush in your right hand.
Clean body, clean mind. But you still feel the dirt beneath your
fingers. You wonder if there is a hell after this.
And you, in all your blindness, have long since found it.
The curse of looking at your existence and being so disgusted
by it that only God's salvation could ever purify you
this deep-seated belief that you are sinful, that you are in the sin
itself. That is your hell.

Author Biography

Aenne Dirks (she/her), is a student at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). As part of the interdisciplinary Bachelor program, she studies German as her first subject and English as her second subject. She spends the majority of her free time savoring the act of holding a pen, expressing herself through both poetry and prose.

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Pleasure in Pain

Nientke Peters

Sitting in the grass in the open countryside
In the dusk of an August summer night
The sweet smell of daisies finds its way
While a hint of peach lingers on my tongue
It's hard to describe what I feel when
I hear my bones crack
I see the deformity in my arm
Adrenaline rushing through my veins
Making me oblivious to the world around
To the knot of anxiety in my mind
To my numbing days of daily distress
This moment this fracture's all that counts
As it soothes me from my withering soul
That's how I find
Pleasure in pain

Author Biography

Nientke Peters (she/her) is a History and English student in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor's program at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). In both of her subjects, she likes to explore the themes and means of external and self-representation, as well the respective reception throughout the centuries. Besides writing analytical term papers, she is also enthusiastic about more creative tasks such as creating own poetry as in Abigail Fagan's poetry class. For this purpose, she drew inspiration from everyday life as a student and her keen interest in psychology.

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On the Bar

Mandana Vahebi

Sitting where
My hands,
holding a glass.
In this glass Lens
I saw you once,
My hands dancing at your presence,
Thousands and I don't know how many styles
And touches
On my organism partner.
See my fist hugging the glass
Its cry-face
Crunched;
I drink the tears
  Cheers!

Author Biography

Mandana Vahebi (she/her) is currently pursuing a master's degree in the division of North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Arak University, Iran. Her academic interests span a wide range of fields, including cultural studies, transnationalism, poetics, affect studies, and media, film, and communication. In her current role as associate editor at the *In Progress* journal at Leibniz University Hannover, Mandana has applied her specialized skills in video essay creation to supply compelling and informative video content in the journal's latest issue.

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Independent Studies: Videographic Criticism

Introduction: The "Research and Exhibition Artefact"[15]

Mandana Vahebi

Introduction

It is a fact that in writing about the cinema there is an inherent compromise in the process of analyzing audiovisual aspects. "Videographic Criticism" has paved the way for scholars to develop their arguments while maintaining the language of film. The second round of the Independent Studies course "Videographic Criticism," led by Kathleen Loock with assistance from Alissa Lienhard and Lida Shams-Mostofi, invited a new group of students to select a film and work with that film over the course of the semester to produce scholarly video essays. The final video essays were then screened for students and faculty members, followed by a discussion and comments. In the current issue of *In Progress*, we look at the practice of videographic criticism, the how-to and structure of the seminar, followed by a brief introduction to the student video essays published in this section.

Since the advent of user-friendly digital technology, experimenting with the digital essence of audiovisual media has become a popular research activity. Videographic criticism as a scholarly method addresses the blurred line between using videography as a method and as a means of communication, validating it as a research practice (Kiss 3). That is, not only as a means of presenting research findings, but also as a means of integrating it into the research process. As Daryl Scott puts it, "we could argue that the creative process is an integral part of practice research-creation, specifically when developing and understanding how research artefact generates new insights" (305). In other words, he states that "videographic criticism can act as a second ancillary artefact that explicates the theoretical and research production processes" (293). What struck me most about videographic criticism was the challenge of balancing personal opinion with objective analysis. For me, the nature of video essays, which present audio-visual arguments underscores the critical importance of balancing subjectivity and objectivity. This approach ensures a well-rounded argument that is mindful of how it is perceived by others. Of course, getting feedback and discussing it was a milestone in evaluating the reception of the video essays we made in class.

Our journey in videographic criticism began with our Independent Studies course, in which each participant chose a film at the beginning of the semester and that film was to be used consistently for all activities. The sessions lasted three hours each and were spread out to give us

[15] The expression is borrowed from an article with the same name by Daryl Scott (see the citation).

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plenty of time to work on our assignments. The course followed the Middlebury model, with a fixed structure and parameter-based assignments that are used in the "Scholarship in Sound & Image" workshop at Middlebury College, Vermont (cf. Keathley and Mittell). The first assignment was a "Videographic PechaKucha," in which we combined "10 video clips, each six seconds long, with one minute of audio" from our selected films and which helped us learn basic editing skills in the video editing software DaVinci Resolve. After each assignment, we watched and discussed our projects, starting in small groups, before moving to the entire class. This routine was maintained for all subsequent classes, which included watching and discussing the previous assignment, receiving a new assignment, and acquiring the necessary skills to produce the next project. Our exercises varied, including making a voice-over exercise, creating a videographic epigraph by adding unrelated text and effects to a scene, and creating a multi-screen composition using film clips from our work and that of our peers. Finally, after these exercises, we began to prepare our final projects, first creating abstract trailers and then developing them into more polished videos.

Throughout the semester, assignments were planned not only to teach us editing skills, but also encourage us to think critically about the use of appropriate techniques to support our arguments. We had the opportunity to participate in "Videography: Art and Academia," an international symposium on the "epistemological, political, and pedagogical potentials of audiovisual practices," which was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, held at Schloss Herrenhausen in Hannover from November 2-4, 2022, and organized by Maike Sarah Reinert, Evelyn Kreutzer, Anna-Sophie Philippi and Kathleen Loock.

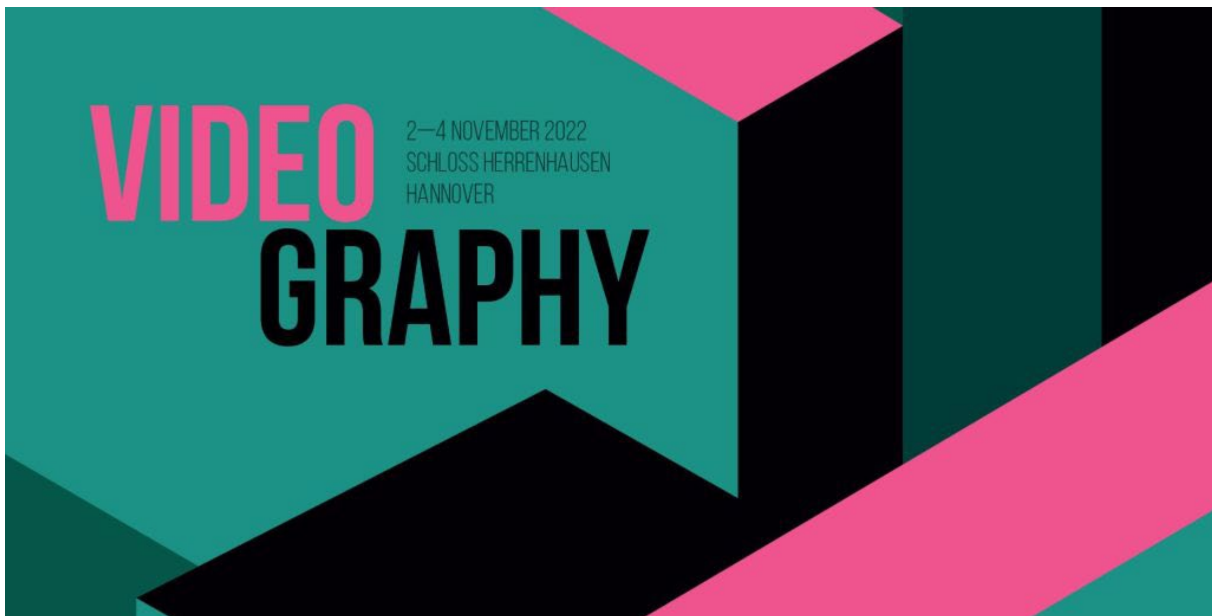

Figure 1. "Videography: Art and Academia. Epistemological, Political, and Pedagogical Potentials of Audiovisual Practices," November 2-4, 2022, organized by Maike Sarah Reinert, Evelyn Kreutzer, Anna-Sophie Philippi, and Kathleen Loock.

We are thrilled to publish student projects in the current issue of *In Progress*. The first three video essays revolve around trauma, each bringing their contextualized insight into trauma to the screen. First, Lida Shams-Mostofi's project analyzes the Elton John biopic *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019) and the aestheticization of the singer's trauma. Next, Shirin Shokrollahi's "Trauma Unleashed" explores the non-linear narrative and visual techniques in the film *Everything Everywhere*

All at Once (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022) and how they are used to represent the character's complex trauma. My own video essay "Traumatic Grief" highlights the skillful use of flashbacks and Free Indirect Discourse (FID) as a cinematic technique in *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016) to blend the characters' traumatic memories with neutral representations. This is followed by Sadjad Qolami's voice-over exercise with footage from the Iranian film *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011). Inspired by Michel Chion's concepts of empathetic and unempathetic sound in cinema, it focuses on the sound of a photocopier. Finally, Kerem Ak's video essay on the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, 2012) analyzes the emotional and intellectual impact of the film's montage techniques and child's perspective on reimagining nature.

For some students, however, the final screening in the seminar was only the beginning of a keen interest in video essays. With Kathleen Loock's updates on what was going on in the international video essay community, Shirin Shokrollahi and Sadjad Qolami have been able to bring their work to a wider audience. Shirin's video essay "Veiled Frames," about narrating the unnarratable in Iranian cinema, received an honorable mention at the Adelio Ferrero Award (2023) and is a semi-finalist at the Phoenix Short Film Festival. And the final videographic project Sadjad made in the course at Leibniz University Hannover, "Separating Windows," was shortlisted for the final round of the Adelio Ferrero Award (2023).

We now invite you to take a look at the video essays and read the creators' statements. Happy watching!

Author Biography

Mandana Vahebi is currently pursuing a master's degree in the division of North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Arak University, Iran. Her academic interests span a wide range of fields, including cultural studies, transnationalism, poetics, affect studies, and media, film, and communication. In her current role as associate editor at the *In Progress* journal at Leibniz University Hannover, Mandana has applied her specialized skills in video essay creation to supply compelling and informative video content in the journal's latest issue.

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Representing the Unrepresentable: Trauma in *Rocketman*

Lida Shams-Mostofi

Lida Shams-Mostofi's video essay "Representing the Unpresentable: Trauma in Rocketman" delves into the representation of trauma in the biographical musical film Rocketman (2019), reflecting traumatic flashbacks of disturbing video sequences. Watch the video essay here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/lkexM.

Creator's Statement

This videographic essay analyzes the representation of trauma in *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019). The biographical musical film pictures the personal life and struggles of the protagonist Elton John (portrayed by Taron Egerton). In its exploration of the traumatic experiences of the protagonists, *Rocketman* often employs fictional scenes to portray the intricacy of their individual experiences. My videographic essay focuses on the implementation of fictionalized scenes to investigate how deeply trauma and fiction go hand in hand. I argue that the processing of trauma is shown in close connection to Elton John's creativity and musical career. Through the implementation of fantastic scenes and (auto)-biographical fragments, the biopic by Dexter Fletcher aestheticizes trauma to establish it as a driving force for creative evolvement.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, a trauma theorist, argues that trauma constitutes an event that "cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (*Trauma* 153), resulting in the unprocessed memory that reoccurs in the form of flashbacks. In this video essay, I aimed to mirror

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those flashbacks by deliberately disrupting video sequences with carefully crafted fictional scenes from the movie, and thus imitating the experience of flashbacks. According to Caruth, trauma cannot be regarded as a normal memory, which is why the mind might respond with uncontrollable hallucinations (*Unclaimed* 11). Accordingly, each emotionally demanding situation of Elton John's life is integrated into a musical piece, indicating music as a hallucinational escape and creativity as a way to be able to cope with remembering the traumatic past. Moreover, the interplay between musical representation and Elton John's coping mechanisms serves as both a rehabilitative outlet to process a traumatic memory or history and emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between creativity and psychological resilience. As including entire musical numbers would have consumed too much time in the video essay, I made use of special effects to distort certain video sequences to simulate hallucinatory experiences. Additionally, I looped two video sequences and overlapped several audio tracks to imitate the traumatic response that particular situations will haunt the affected person repeatedly (4). I intend to show that the motif of proving oneself worthy of love is strongly recognizable and very prominent in the protagonist's behavior throughout the biopic, which suits the American psychologist David Henry Feldman's observation that some artists have the "need to prove that one is worthy of respect and admiration […] or to provide refuge from trauma" (175).

Overall, *Rocketman* represents traumatic events consistently in an aestheticized and fictionalized manner. It displays the movie's intentional creative choices that contribute to the development of the audience's engagement and a sophisticated examination of the interaction between trauma, creative expression, and the construction of personal narratives. The filmic choices of slow-motion effects and the changing of lighting highlight traumatic scenes as hallucinations while simultaneously making emotionally challenging situations more entertaining for viewers. I highlighted those scenes in particular to point out how *Rocketman* manages to depict trauma in a highly aestheticized manner throughout the film. However, it is important to question whether or not trauma should be aestheticized to begin with and to keep in mind that this bears the danger of glorifying trauma.

Author Biography

Lida Shams-Mostofi (she/her) is a student assistant and master student in the division of American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a B.A. in English and History. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on critical race theory, autotheory, film, feminism, intersectionality, and gender studies.

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Trauma Unleashed

Shirin Shokrollahi

Shirin Shokrollahi's video essay "Trauma Unleashed" delves into the intricate layers of Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) to unravel the visceral portrayal of trauma and its aftermath, mapping the journey from fragmentation to wholeness within the film's multiversal chaos. Watch video essay here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/mMrjj.

Creator's Statement

Utilizing scenes from the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and integrating text from Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, "Trauma Unleashed" offers a poignant exploration of the intricate landscape of trauma and recovery. The video essay delves into the character of Evelyn's daughter, Joy, who transforms into Jobu Tupaki, a manifestation of trauma's multifaceted impact on the psyche and the challenging journey toward healing. The movie itself is an intricate tapestry of multiverse chaos and connection, providing a fitting backdrop to discuss the non-linear and pervasive nature of trauma, as outlined in Van der Kolk's seminal work. Just as the film navigates through multiple realities, *The Body Keeps the Score* similarly traverses the various dimensions of trauma – its imprints on our mind, brain, and body – and the subsequent task of reclaiming one's sense of self and agency.

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In "Trauma Unleashed," the visual narrative skillfully draws a parallel between Jobu Tupaki's fragmentation and the splintering effects of trauma as it distorts time, memory, and identity. The selected scenes are not just a depiction of a character's breakdown but are symbolic of the internal chaos frequently experienced by trauma survivors. Incorporating text from *The Body Keeps the Score* further anchors these scenes in the scientific and psychological comprehension of trauma, emphasizing that its effects are not merely limited to the emotional realm but encompass physiological and neurological spheres as well.

Crafting the audiovisual structure to encapsulate the disjointed reality of a traumatized mind, the video essay employs rapid cuts, distorted sounds, and a non-linear storyline to mirror the disorientation and confusion evoked by trauma. The juxtaposition of serene moments with chaotic interludes represents the unpredictable journey of healing – the ebbs and flows of gaining and losing control, of remembering and forgetting.

"Trauma Unleashed" serves as a narrative bridge. It acknowledges the complexity of trauma, the challenges in articulating its effect for those who experience it, and the transformative power of understanding and empathy. It also intends to reflect on the therapeutic potential inherent in storytelling and the arts as effective tools for expressing the inexpressible and forging a path towards recovery. This video essay is an invitation to witness the silent battles waged in the aftermath of trauma. It is a reminder that healing is not a return to a prior state but an ongoing process of transformation. It's about finding a way to coexist with the memories and the scars, to manage the overwhelming sensations and emotions, and to reclaim one's own narrative. "Trauma Unleashed" aspires to validate and shed light on the innate resilience and courage inherent in the journey of recovery.

Author Biography

Shirin Shokrollahi (she/her), currently pursuing her master's in North American Studies with an emphasis on Popular Culture, Media, and the Public Sphere at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH), has cultivated a scholarly appreciation for the intricate dance of literature and media. A graduate in English Language and Literature from Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran (Iran), Shirin has translated her academic insights into practice, not only as a translator with three published novels but also as a discerning editor. Her video editing and storytelling pursuits are mirrored in her creative engagements, where she has been recognized with an Honorable Mention in the Video Essay category at the Adelio Ferrero Festival and as a Semi-finalist for Best Documentary Short at Phoenix International Short Film Festival. She is a member of the "Editors Association of Iran" and the "Translators & Interpreters' Association of Tehran."

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Traumatic Grief

Mandana Vahebi

In this video essay, trauma is portrayed through the cinematic technique of Free Indirect Discourse (FID). The constant interchange between the camera's narrative perspective and the character's traumatic grief creates a blurred line that makes it difficult to discern a single, unified point of view. Consequently, FID introduces an artistic ambiguity that significantly enhances the film's artistic value. Watch the video essay here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/zVbEq.

Creator's Statement

Upon viewing *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) for the first time, I was certain that this is a deeply moving movie that explores poignant themes of grief, guilt, and redemption, providing profound portrayal of the intricacies of human emotions. Set against the backdrop of a small Massachusetts fishing town, Lee Chandler is shocked to learn that he has been named the sole guardian of his teenage nephew, Patrick, following the sudden death of his brother, Joe. As Lee reluctantly returns to Manchester-by-the-Sea, where his past and present collide, the film delves into his tragic backstory, revealing a life scarred by a heartbreaking loss, which led to his withdrawal from the world.

As Lee carries the weight of his inner traumatic grief, the flashbacks, with the help of the narrative, vividly and skillfully portray an ambiguity, that resonates with the audience. The viewer watches a series of scenes that seemingly present a neutral recounting of events from Lee's past.

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However, they are aware of Lee's withdrawn attitude toward life and his grief. The vague realization revolves around whether the memory of the horrible past events is a matter of accepting them, merely reviewing them, or the protagonist's inability or struggle to overcome them. In employing flashbacks as an FID cinematic technique, the voice of a third-person narrator (camera) seamlessly blends with the thoughts or speech of the protagonist, Lee.

Although in literature FID is identified through textual elements such as narrative style, word choice, and syntax, in cinema FID is conveyed through audio-visual means such as camera angles, editing, sound design, and acting. Navigating this transition between mediums requires an examination of the art of expertly converting literary techniques into visual storytelling, reshaping the intricacies of inner contemplation into captivating experiences on the screen. My intention was to highlight cinematic scenes in *Manchester by the Sea* to demonstrate how traumatic feelings are skillfully blended with neutral representations by the camera, making it challenging to distinguish between the two. This purposeful blending of elements gives rise to a nuanced and rich emotional landscape, blurring the distinction between the character's internal struggles and the objective portrayal of events. Through the lens of the camera, the audience is invited to experience a more authentic and emotionally intense cinematic narrative. As a result, the ambiguity created by FID both sustains the viewer's curiosity and enhances their artistic cinematic experience. It makes the audience gain a profound appreciation for the film's capacity to depict the multifaceted nature of humanity, surpassing the boundaries typically associated with the conventional storytelling.

Author Biography

Mandana Vahebi is currently pursuing a master's degree in North American Studies at Leibniz University. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Arak University, Iran. Her academic interests span a wide range of fields, including cultural studies, transnationalism, poetics, affect studies, and media, film, and communication. In her current role as Associate Editor at the *In Progress* journal at Leibniz University Hannover, Mandana has applied her specialized skills in video essay creation to the addition of compelling and informative video content in the journal's latest issue.

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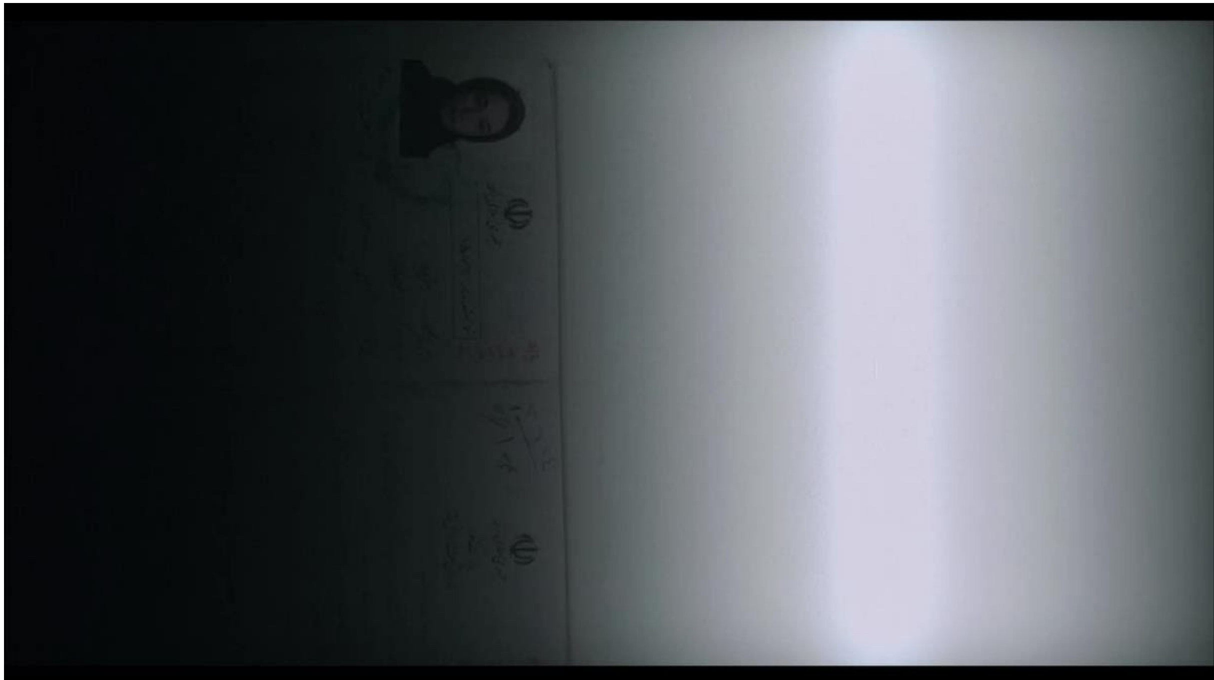
A Reading in the Machine

Sadjad Qolami



Sadjad Qolami's video essay utilizes the opening credits of A Separation (2011), featuring a photocopy machine in operation, as a metaphor for the cinematic apparatus – a machine generating copies of reality, a machine that indifferently unwinds no matter how harsh the depicted event is. Watch the video essay here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/gbXgM.

Creator's Statement

My relatively concise piece was crafted as an assignment on the exploration of voiceover within the context of a Videographic Criticism workshop at Leibniz University Hannover. We were supposed to choose a film at the beginning of the workshop and not change it for different assignments. When creating a PechaKucha based on my chosen film, *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011), I initially selected the sound from the opening credits. However, in my final revision of the PechaKucha, I decided to use another part of the soundtrack. When the time came for a voiceover assignment, I recalled the eerie sound of the copy machine that had haunted me ever since. I chose to record a voiceover on that particular section.

The inspiration for my reading stemmed from my prior knowledge of Michel Chion's work on film sound. Within his influential work *Audio-Vision*, Chion introduces the concepts of empathetic and anempathetic sound, providing profound insights into the dynamic interplay

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between music and emotion within the realm of cinema. According to his viewpoint, music in film has the capacity to evoke particular emotions in relation to the depicted situation on the screen through two distinctive avenues.

Empathetic musical compositions directly engage with the emotions of the scene, aligning with elements such as rhythm, tone, and phrasing to contribute to the overall atmosphere. Coined by Chion as "empathetic music," this terminology is inspired by empathy, effectively evoking shared emotional experiences within the audience. In contrast, anempathetic music, marked by conspicuous indifference, progresses steadily, forming a backdrop of "indifference" against the scene. Instead of freezing emotion, this musical expression intensifies it, inscribing it onto a cosmic background. Chion characterizes it "anempathetic," embodied in cinema through various elements such as player pianos and dance bands, cleverly reinforcing emotions while pretending not to notice.

Ultimately, the anempathetic effect is predominantly associated with music, but Chion extends its reach to noise as well. In specific scenes, following the death of a character, a sonic process may persist – an echoing noise of a machine, the hum of a fan, or the ambient sound of a running shower – as if oblivious to the tragic event. Iconic examples of this technique include Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), specifically the iconic shower scene, and Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), where the persistent sound of an electric fan plays a crucial role. In these instances, anempathetic noise operates to further intensify the emotional impact by challenging conventional expectations and emphasizing the mechanical essence of cinema. In cinema, the prominence of anempathetic effects is attributed to the medium's essence, intimately connected to its mechanical nature. Chion contends that films, propelled by the indifferent and automatic unwinding of projection, create simulacra of movement and life. While this mechanical essence is hidden with the help of life-like images and synchronized sound and music, anempathetic sound, in particular, unveils the mechanical nature of cinema, exposing its robotic face.

Author Biography

Sadjad Qolami (he/him) is a master's student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover in Germany. He holds a bachelor's degree in English from Guilan University and a master's degree in Cinema from Tehran University of Art, both located in Iran. His master's thesis explored the aesthetics of off-screen space within the films of Michael Haneke. He has translated books into Farsi, including *Vampyr* written by David Rudkin: a monograph on Carl Theodor Dreyer's horror masterpiece. His focused interests include film studies, Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis, and modern philosophy. He is currently captivated by the manifestations of horror and disgust: ghosts, monsters, djins, and specters. His final project in the Videographic Criticism Workshop at Leibniz University Hannover, "Separating Windows," was shortlisted for the final round in Adelio Ferrero Festival (2023).

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Benh Zeitlin Breaks the Ice

Kerem Ak

Through his movie, Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012), Benh Zeitlin thaws the ice between humankind and nature and provides a unique and heartfelt perspective about how to come to terms with the more-than-human world. Watch the video essay here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/JNOWr.

Creator's Statement

My video essay, titled "Benh Zeitlin Breaks the Ice," endeavors to make sense of the complex, ongoing, evolving, and destructive global phenomenon: climate change. Examining the movie itself, the essay takes a closer look at the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change. This perplexing phenomenon occupies a serious presence across various media outlets, and the news about the current state and developments of Earth's climate tends to generate a profound sense of loss, hopelessness, and grief. To put it another way, representations of the ecological crisis in mainstream media seem to only exacerbate the fracture between humanity and nature. This prompts contemplation whether there is a potential to alleviate and process the distressing feelings associated with the ongoing climate catastrophe. Cinema, with its potential to demonstrate alternative perspectives and effectively address climate distress, emerges as a powerful medium capable of addressing the issue. Therefore, cinema functions not only as an effective tool to tackle

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the problem but also as a platform to offer an opportunity for a renewed connection between individuals and the natural world. In this video essay, I reference Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) to illustrate cinema's capacity to grapple with climate change and instill sentiments of love and hope in these times of ecological chaos.

Beasts exemplifies the destructive facets of climate change by making use of distinctive montage techniques, reminiscent of those commonly found in Sergei Eisenstein's cinema. These unique techniques serve to amplify the emotional and intellectual impact of the shots on the audience. The imagery in these shots varies from tangible elements like icebergs to poignant representations of extinct cattle species such as aurochs. Furthermore, Zeitlin intentionally employs unsteady, wobbly camera movements throughout the film, crafting a documentary-like effect that captures the perspective of a child experiencing climate change. These stylistic choices proved useful in allowing me to touch not only the devastating impacts of climate change but also one's intimate contact with the more-than-human world.

In this video essay, I initially conceptualize climate change using the term "hyperobject," interpreting it as a phenomenon that "involves profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones" (Morton 1). Through an examination of stylistic preferences, visual portrayals, and the conceptual framing of climate change as a "hyperobject," the essay seeks to deepen our comprehension of the nuanced and intricate relationship between cinema and environmental issues. I articulate this concept through a voice-over and support it with the film's compelling footage illustrating the consequences or effects of climate change. I also make use of split-screen techniques in order to demonstrate the types of human interaction with nature, aiming to reinforce the notion of building up a more constructive relationship with the natural world.

Author Biography

Kerem Ak is a student of the North American Studies Master's program at Leibniz University Hannover. His study interests include fantasy literature, utopias and dystopias, nature writing, climate fiction, festival movies, and podcasts. He also contributed to the *T-Litcon: 1st Annual International Conference on Literature: "Human Rights & Literature"* (2023) with his abstract on Gilbert Imlay's epistolary novel, *The Emigrants* (1793).

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Open Section

Conference Report: 2023 PGF Conference "Spaces and Affect in the Americas"

Holly Fischer, Simge Irmak Çinar, and Ioana-Marina Pantelici

Figure 1: This scrapbook collage by Ioana-Marina Pantelici explores and condenses some impressions from the 2023 PGF Conference on "Spaces of Affect in the Americas" – an event during which emotions, affect, empathy and intellect took center stage.

Introduction

The 33rd annual conference of the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS/DGfA), took place at Leibniz Universität Hannover from November 9 to 11, 2023. Headlined by the theme "Spaces of Affect in the Americas" and organized by Stefan Dierkes, Katerina Steffan, and Lujain Youssef, the conference explored the intricate relationship between affect, identity, and spatiality in American Studies and aimed to create a unique gathering space for early-career researchers from across Germany and Europe. In addition to five panels with altogether eighteen academic presentations, the PGF team also organized social events, including a visit of the Kestner Gesellschaft and dinners for the conference participants.

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Based on photos and video material that the In Progress editorial team 2023/2024 gathered at the PGF Conference "Spaces of Affect in the Americas," Mandana Vahebi edited an introductory video. Watch it here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/WqPxD.

Day 1: Centering Marginalized Voices in Affect Studies

The first panel on "Centering Marginalized Voices in Affect Studies" began with three speakers. Natalie Erkel, who holds master's degrees in Education, North American Studies, and English Language from the University of Göttingen, and is currently a PHD student and a research assistant at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB), gave a talk on Rivers Solomon's novella, *The Deep*. The presentation examined the aspects of affect, emotion, and memory in a modern utopia that envisions an aquatic community formed by enslaved African women, deconstructing colonial perspectives, and empowering the historically silenced. Erkel argued that the conventions of literary utopia are implemented in *The Deep* to negotiate the question of belonging, to navigate between dimensions of time, and to provide a space for giving voice to trauma and the slave trade.

Then, Arunima Kundu (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg) used her talk on "Affective Worldmaking and Counterpublic(s): Afrofuturism and Planetary Posthuman Critique in NK Jemisin's *The City We Became*" to examine how Jemisin's science-fiction novel engages with issues of race, otherness, and blackness in North America and the United States, using the notion of the planetary posthuman as a theoretical frame.

The next presentation, by Can Aydin from the Technical University of Dresden, explored the theme of shame in Billy Ray Belcourt's collection of essays *A History of My Brief Body*. In doing so, Aydin focused on the shame of the queer Indigenous subject in public spaces, particularly medical institutions. The narrative of *A History of My Brief Body*, which unfolds after a troubling sexual encounter that leaves the narrator fearful of a possible HIV infection, reveals the vulnerability of the subject when queerness and Indigeneity intersect. As the narrator is denied the empathetic support needed to overcome shame by indifferent active agents in the healthcare system, this situation leads to feelings of abandonment.

Keynote Address by Anne Potjans (HU Berlin)

Following the first panel, Anne Potjans from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin delivered the conference keynote address, entitled "The Sound of Anger: Black Feminist Frequencies," in which she explored the intersection of anger, racial oppression, and inequality in the inner lives of Black people. Focusing on the aftermath of colonialism and slavery, Potjans discussed Black anger as an important affective element of historical consciousness, shaped by the convergence of gendered and rationalized structures of oppression in which Black women's emotional lives and responses are misrecognized and distorted. In her keynote, Potjans highlighted the important role of anger and rage in U.S. social movements and argued that Black anger, grief, and rage deserve space for articulation because of their transformative potential. However, according to Potjans, these articulations are often limited by mainstream sensibilities regarding the public expression of emotions, particularly for Black people. Thus, Potjans's argument built on the intersectional question of who is allowed to express anger and rage in public spaces.

Drawing on white feminist discourses since the 1960s, Potjans furthermore discussed the strategic use of madness and anger as tools against patriarchal structures. Noting that racialized traits were often associated with these expressions, Potjans pointed out that the use of color symbolism implied a connection between race, emotion, mental illness, and emotional excess. Potjans then examined the intersectionality of black women's experiences, focusing specifically on the emotion of anger. Stereotypes play a role in shaping public perceptions of black emotions, imposing anti-black stereotypes on these emotions before real understanding can occur. The control of black emotions, particularly anger, thus becomes a tool for maintaining social inequality, which is why links are drawn to the criminalization of black hoodies and the perpetuation of harmful ideologies. In this context, Potjans highlighted how the alleged hyper-emotionality attributed to black people contributes to their dismissal and trivialization, thus reinforcing historical narratives that label black suffering as an overreaction. Even before meaningful engagement can take place, black feminist anger is often judged, dismissed, and pathologized, Potjans explained, which is why it is arguable that the denial of anger, particularly for black women, is seen as a way of negatively connoting their relationship to the human, which is often described as white, heterosexual, and male.

Potjans also explored the intersection of madness and Blackness, moving on to an analysis of the creative expression of anger in the music of Black feminist artist Angel Haze. Discussing two songs, "Wicked Moon" and "The Wolves," which create a threatening atmosphere and convey a sense of internalized violence, Potjans argued that Haze adopts a hypermasculine persona to articulate her emotions and navigate the oppressive structures of society. In the Q&A following Anne Potjans's keynote address, questions were raised about the political impact of anger and its empowering potential. It is important to recognize anger as a multifaceted emotion and to create spaces where it can be cultivated and expressed. In the case of Angel Haze, music shows that anger can be invoked and ritualized through the transformative space of the stage. The keynote thus highlighted the challenging and limited frameworks that define acceptable forms of anger through the medium of music and explored anger as a complex emotion within the theme of Black Feminist Frequencies.

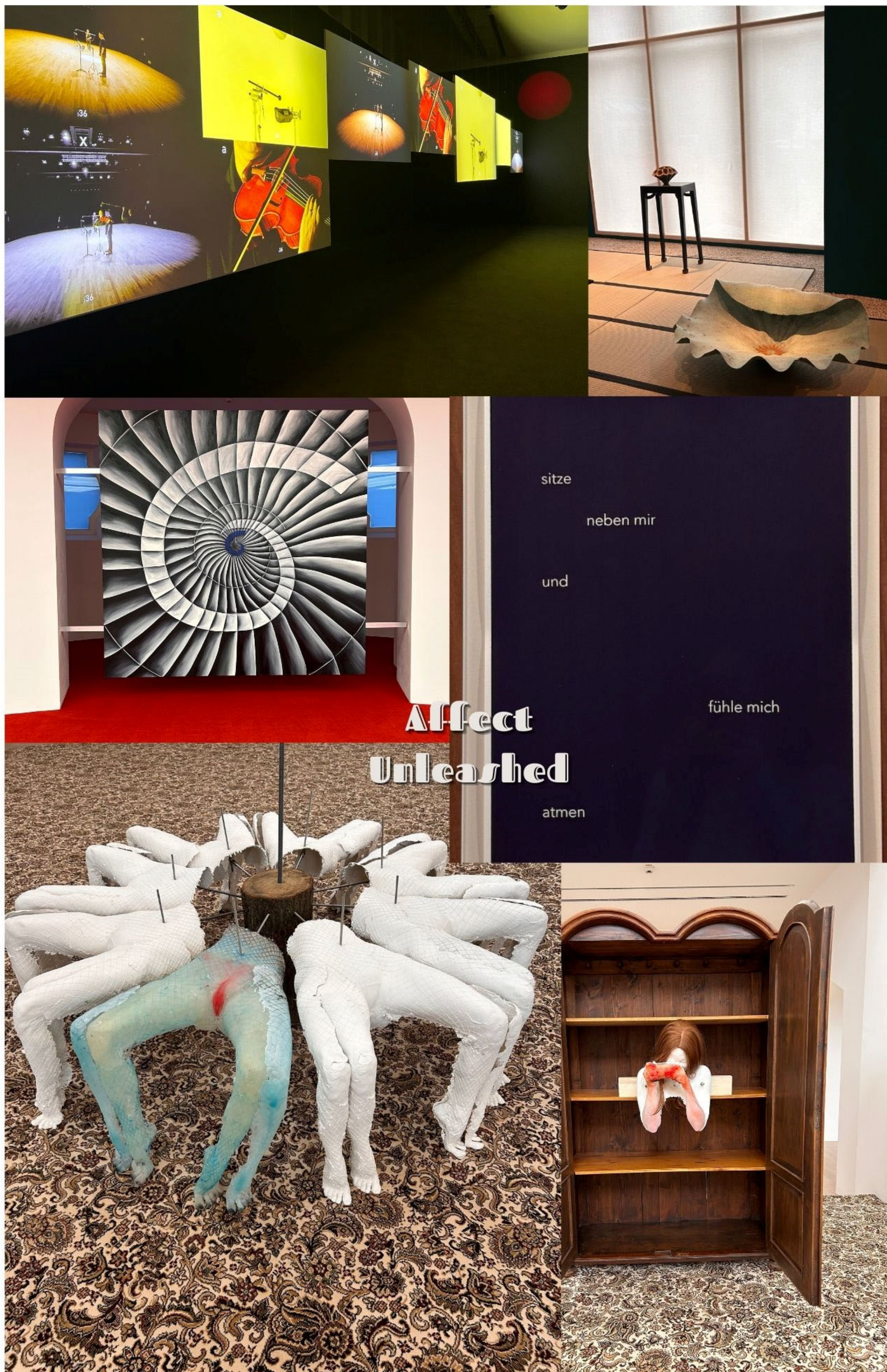

Figure 2: Holly Fischer's scrapbook page assembles some views of the artworks conference participants encountered during their visit to the Kestner Gesellschaft – impressions which remain frozen in time and yet remain full of vibrant energy.

Excursion to the Kestner Gesellschaft

On the second day, the conference team had organized an excursion to the Kestner Gesellschaft. Three main exhibitions were on display at the museum: Rebecca Ackroyd's *Period Drama*, *A World of Dew, and in Every Drop of Dew, a World of Struggle* from the collection of Dr. Christiane Hackerodt and Art and Culture Foundation, and Samson Young's *Situated Listening*.

Period Drama is Rebecca Ackroyd's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany. It explores both the physical and the mystical, the real and the unseen. Ackroyd's works resemble apocalyptic fantasies yet are grounded in a sense of reality, undertaking a critical exploration of the human body, subconsciousness, and the spatial dimensions of sexuality. In her detailed examination of femininity and spirituality, Ackroyd blends audacity with vulnerability, seduction with repulsion. Abstract and surreal elements flow together in her art, creating a mysterious language – one that is informed by her fascinating and unpredictable use of diverse materials such as wooden furniture, resin, mechanical parts, and plaster, which come together in complex installations and sculptures that resemble (parts of) human bodies.

In a marked difference to Ackroyd's works, the collection *A World of Dew, and in Every Drop of Dew A World of Struggle* delved into traditional Japanese scroll paintings from the last five centuries, aiming to bridge East and West by exploring Zen Buddhism, as well as Japanese house traditions and ceremonies. Before entering the room, visitors were required to remove their shoes to truly feel the touch of the bamboo floor from Japan. The exhibition featured over 40 Japanese scroll images with a focus on the seasons and the most popular natural motifs – landscapes with flowers and animals, emphasizing the fragility of nature and its association with human beings. This exhibition also featured more recent art, including sculptural works by Japanese artist Morio Nishimura, which deepened the dialogue between past traditions and today's contemporary practices. Overall, the exhibition of pieces from the Hackerodt collection thus managed to provide a holistic experience that surpassed the temporality of the here and now.

The concluding exhibition was Samson Young's aesthetically precise *Situated Listening,* which created spaces that mix sound and images in different ways. *The Travelers and the Listeners*, for instance, is a collage of six musical films based on Walter de la Mere's short poem, "The Listeners" (1912) that used image negatives and sound design to evoke impressions of ghosts and phantoms behind a locked door, revealing the hidden and the unseen. By contrast, Young's sound and video installation *Variations of 96 Chords in Space (feat. William Lane)* consists of 96 colors converted into a chord by a computer program that follows a pattern most of the time, but sometimes it does things randomly based on the similarity of the colors. In more than one way, the meticulous preparations showcased in all three exhibitions thus resonated nicely with the conference's scholarly explorations of affect theory.

Day Two: (Em)Bodied Affects

On the second day, the panels were devoted to the cross-section of affects and physical experience. The term "embodied affects" indicates that emotions are not only experienced mentally but also have a physical basis, emphasizing that emotions and affects are not just abstract feelings but are connected and manifested in the body. The presentation by Judith Schreier, a PhD student at Humboldt University of Berlin, turned our attention to the genre of fat life writing. Focusing on Aubrey Gordon's *You Just Need to Lose Weight and 19 Other Myths about Fat People*, Schreier explored the genre's relation to self-help literature. She argued that Gordon's book serves as a call to action, providing the reader with facts to challenge misconceptions surrounding body weight. By criticizing

the societal judgment and prejudices against obesity, Gordon's book opposes the conventional notions of self-help, offering a more emotionally active and motivating call-for-action book, Schreier argued. She then went on to show how Gordon creates a unique narrative that combines the intellectual and the personal by moving back and forth between academic theory and personal experience, exploring themes related to body image, societal perceptions of weight, and discrimination based on body size. Schreier's talk concluded by acknowledging Gordon's contribution to the genre of fat life writing and her impact on perceptions, identity, and activism.

Nadine Walter, a third-year doctoral student in the interdisciplinary, DFG-funded research training group (*Graduiertenkolleg*) "Power of Interpretation" (*Deutungsmacht*) at the University of Rostock, followed with her talk titled "Claiming the Abortion Narrative: Trajectories of Feminism in Glennon Doyle's Writing." An author, speaker, and activist, Glennon Doyle's perspective on abortion is worthy of examination. On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court revoked *Roe v. Wade,* a landmark decision that had legally guaranteed access to abortion in the United States since 1973, ushering in a new crisis for women's rights. This decision immediately started debates on the current state of women's rights. Doyle, who identifies as evangelical, weaves her personal experiences, including her abortion, into her narrative to defy conservative evangelical ideals on abortion. As Walter showed in her talk, this is particularly palpable in Doyle's memoir *Untamed,* in which she examines social hierarchy and power dynamics in relation to sexuality. The primary goal of Doyle's book is to actively and intentionally alter the way individuals perceive and understand abortion, striving to challenge preconceived notions and promote a more open-minded point of view of the issue. According to Walter, Doyle's journey, her critique of evangelical abortion narratives, and her attempts to change societal expectations about abortion illuminate her powerful role in reshaping conversations about reproductive rights and traditional gender norms.

Nina Marie Voigt, a PhD student at the University of Heidelberg, was the next speaker at the conference and presented a paper entitled "'Except for the Hysteria, She's the Perfect Wife': Women and Medicalization in *An Inconvenient Wife*," which focused on the portrayal of medical discourses surrounding women in Amy McKey's 2009 novel of the same name. In McKey's novel, newly married woman from New York's high society at the end of the nineteenth century is diagnosed with both hysteria and infertility and subjected to medical treatments. Going through several procedures to conform to the expectations of the society as an 'acceptable' wife, the protagonist's arc, Voigt pointed out, constitutes a forceful representation of how medicalization both molds individual experiences and highlights larger issues regarding women's autonomy and identity. Opting for a Foucauldian approach to analyze the novel's depiction of gendered emotions and medicalization, Voigt effectively showcased how the novel comments and reflects on issues for both the past and the socio-cultural landscapes of the present, including historical constructions of hysteria, their relation to female bodies, and the repercussions of labeling a woman as hysterical based on her gender.

Next, Maria Menzel from the University of Amsterdam gave a talk on "Animated Bodies: The Worker's Body as a Space of Affect in *Sorry to Bother You*." She examined the representation of different forms of animatedness within the context of the film *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018). Focusing on the concept of animatedness as a minor affect, Menzel analyzed the liveliness, strength, or dynamism associated with various characters and elements in the film, exploring the ways in which affect and attachment are connected or 'stick to' certain entities through 'histories of contact.' Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed and others, Menzel argued that the subjectivities of the workers in the film are shaped by their work – and that the film uses techniques such as Claymation and animatronics to present a nightmarish image of the flexible and productive worker.

Making a connection between *Sorry to Bother You*'s human-horse hybrid workers (the so-called Equisapiens) and the historical exploitation of people of color, as well as the history of slavery in the US, Menzel convincingly pointed out that the film draws comparisons between the exploitation of the workers' bodies and previous injustices endured by marginalized communities.

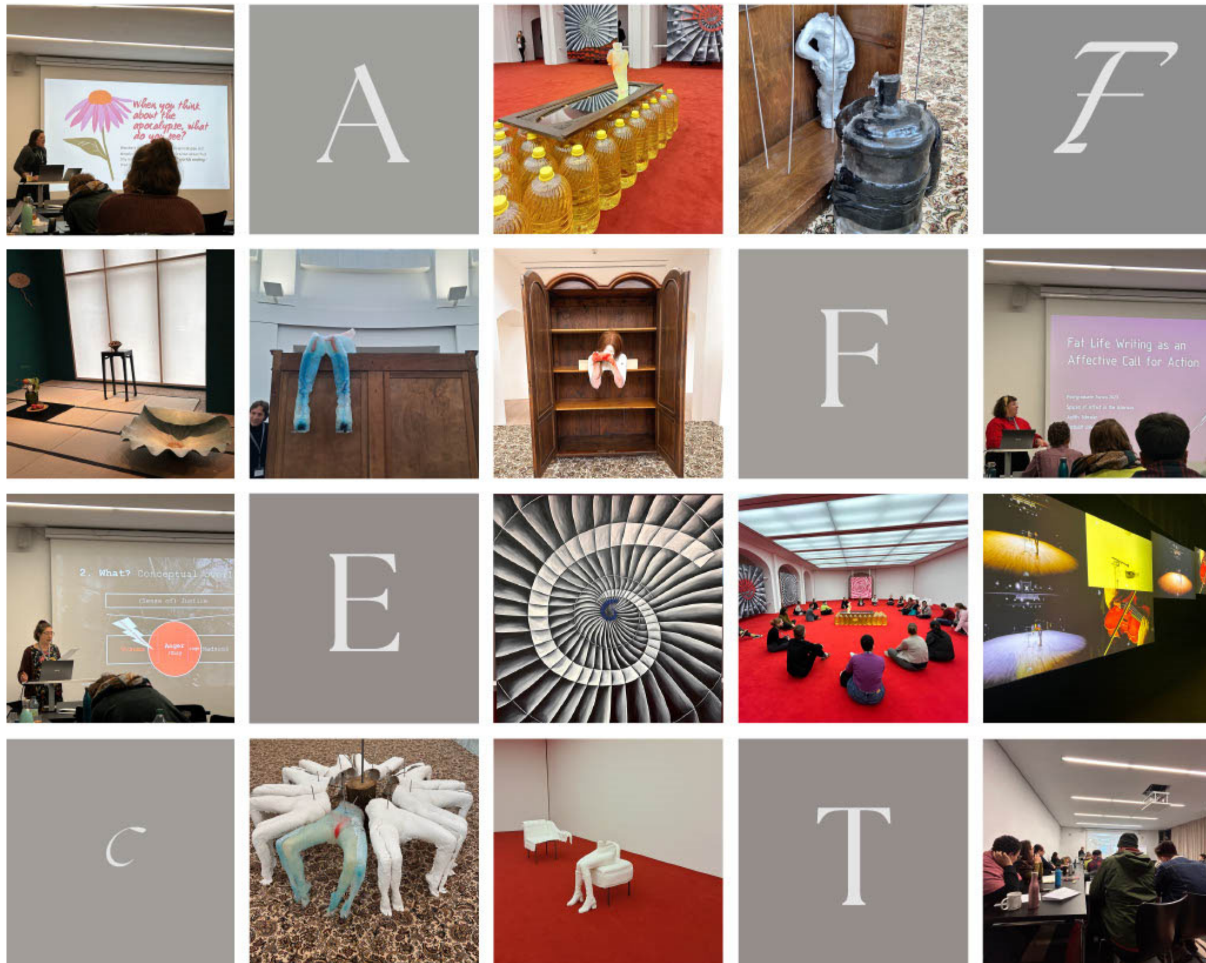

Figure 3: This scrapbook page by Simge Irnak Çinar captures the power of affective experiences and reflects on the conference's participants ability to explore the nuances of emotion and its societal ramifications.

Day Three: Emotional Landscapes

The last day of the conference consisted of three panels: "Exploring the Emotional Landscape," "Crossing Boundaries of Space, Body, and Genre," and lastly "Queering Affect: Exploring Emotional Landscapes in Queer Studies." The first speaker was PhD student Julia Machtenberg from Ruhr-Universität Bochum with a talk on "'This dream of water – what does it harbor?': Agha Shahid Ali's Affective Re-Mapping of the Americas." Machtenberg argued that Ali's poetry collection "A Nostalgist's Map of America" (1991) constructs "affective landscapes" through the depiction of vulnerable states which are emphasized through reimagining the United States as a landscape that transgresses conventional bounds. Next, Sandra Meerwein, a PhD candidate from Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, presented on "Perceptions of Space: The Effect of Socio-Political Geography on Foreign Policy in the Pacific." Her closing statement on the talk was that this topic deals with a prominent discrepancy as the Navy is a heavy polluter of the Pacific but is

protected due to their role as peacekeepers. Moving away from the Pacific Ocean, Philip James Grider from the University of Göttingen then gave a talk entitled "'A Vast and Howling Wilderness': Otherness in the Early American Landscape" that discussed wilderness as a source of anxiety for European settlers who viewed the indigenous presence as hauntingly present within or dissolved into the American landscape.

The next panel started with PhD candidate Wesley Moore from the FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, who analyzed Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) with regards to digital space and representations of death and trauma and concluded with the fascinating observation that death is erased from life by its repeated representation in the media. Franziska Wolf, who is a PhD student at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf presented on "Mattered Being: Beauty is Only the Raw Material of Success." Wolf focused on Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, where the protagonist loses all but her beauty and, therefore, the nucleus around which her life is rebuilt. According to Wolf, Wharton's novel thus reframes human (female) physicality as a form of capital that must be groomed and well looked after to be maintained. The following talk was held by Franz Liebster, a PhD candidate at the University of Tübingen. Focusing on the poetry and literary criticism of John Berryman, Liebster discussed Berryman's reading of affect in Keats' Letters. Susen Halank from the University of Bamberg gave the last talk of the panel, "A Soul's Release: Elizabeth Bishop and Lauren MacIver – Friendship, Anxiety, and Emotional Correspondence." Halank analyzed selected letters written by Elizabeth Bishop to her friend Loren MacIver, showcasing her complicated and slow process of writing poetry whilst describing vivid emotions in prose about everyday life, anxieties, and alcoholism.

The final panel began with Corina Wieser-Cox, a PhD student at the University of Bremen, and her talk on "Desire and Intimacy During Doomsday: Indigiqueer & 2Spirit Apocalypses in *Love After the End* (2020)." Focusing on the intersection of apocalyptic fiction and the futurism of 2Spirit and Indigiqueer authors collected in the short story anthology *Love After the End*, Wieser-Cox emphasized that apocalypse does not necessarily mean one large event but might also refer to several smaller world endings. According to Wieser-Cox, the central concerns of *Love After the End* cluster around the questions of how apocalypses are created and survived, who calls an event apocalyptic, and who must be affected by it for it to be referred to as "canon." In her conclusion, Wieser-Cox turned to the issue of survival strategies, suggesting that *Love After the End* lobbies against the abandonment of relationships and situations in times of crisis, and for shared responsibilities, reciprocity, and attempts to stay and fix what is broken. Johanna Kluger from Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn then gave a talk entitled "Beyond Hero and Heroine: Queering the Popular Romance Novel Protagonist." Kluger introduced the genre of the romance novel and its obligatory 'happily ever after ' ending. According to Kluger, queer romance shares many of the same features with other types of romance fiction but includes at least one explicitly non-cis-heterosexual protagonist; importantly, it furthermore co-opts or redefines the happy ending in terms of coming out, marriage, or children. The final contribution to the conference was made by TU Dresden's Laura Handl, whose talk "Affecting from the Margins: Politics of Trauma Disclosure in Queer Manifesto Memoirs" focused on a genre of manifesto-style literature that has become increasingly popular since 2015. In particular, Handl zoomed in on manifestos by queer activists who incorporate of negotiations of trauma to increase their purchase within contemporary political discourses.

The three days of the conference included exciting insights and interesting topics that left participants eager to delve deeper into the spaces of affect. Each panel was filled with interesting research questions, insights, and conclusions, and the lively discussion at the end of each talk

attested to the enthusiasm and enjoyment of all present. Covering a wide range of topics that clustered around the inclusion of marginalized voices as well as the notions of embodied affects, emotional landscapes, and affective boundaries, the 2023 PGF conference thus left its participants with the best kind of feeling that an event such as this can provide: that of having learned something, of having been in the presence of exceptionally smart people – and, above all, of having had a really good time.

Author Biographies

Holly Fischer is in the final stages of pursuing her master's degree in North American Studies at Leibniz Universität Hannover. She graduated from Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität in Bonn with a bachelor's degree in English Studies. At Leibniz Universität, she is currently a member of the *In Progress* editorial board.

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Ioana-Marina Pantelici is currently pursuing a dual master's degree in North American Studies and Education. She holds an interdisciplinary bachelor's degree in English and History with a specialization in Education. Her research interests are varied and cover graphic novels, immigrant literature, and short stories. She is currently involved with *In Progress* through the Independent Studies module and plans to join the editorial board in the coming semester. Through her contributions, she aims to engage readers with varied perspectives while gaining a deeper understanding of the editorial process of an academic journal.

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Interview with the Local PGF Conference Organizers Katerina Steffan and Lujain Youssef

Conducted by Ioana-Marina Pantelici, transcribed by Adebola Ojo

Figure 1: Katerina Steffan and Lujain Youssef share some insights about their experiences in planning 2023 PGF Conference "Spaces of Affect in the Americas" in Hannover. Watch a video of the interview, edited by Mandana Vahebi, here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/ZkAxd.

Ioana-Marina Pantelici: *Can you share some behind-the-scenes details about the planning and the logistical aspects of the PGF 2023?*

Lujain Youssef: Let me describe it with one word: Chaos! I mean, at the very beginning, we did not know what to do, what to expect, how to organize anything. We did several brainstorming sessions and then we started losing members of the organizing team. Then, you need to put it together like a puzzle. When you have a little bit of something, you can add to it, and then it starts looking like something that is structured and organized.

Katerina Steffan: I think the most important thing is that we got a lot of help. We got Team Regensburg who did this last year and who were very helpful, who gave us all the lists of what they

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organized, and which different aspects should be considered – for example, the money issue. And they also gave us time slots, saying what you should do first and what to do later, like trying to contact someone to give the keynote at the very beginning – and maybe do not contact three at the same time. There were lots of practical tips that they also got from other PGF meetings before; there is just this huge, collaborative effort. Different files that exist have been passed on like some kind of knowledge. I think we would have missed a lot of things if we did not have those.

Lujain Youssef: Of course, yes. We had all the general guidelines, and now we can be the experts for the next team. So, we had all these guidelines and tips, and we had to make sense of where to begin and what to do to have something that resembles what other teams have already accomplished. We had the end result of what they did, and then we had to begin somewhere and built it up. The thing is that, throughout the years, the PGF developed a lot. I have only been to one and the years before it was very informal. People would come together and, supposedly, share their work. It was not organized as a real conference; I think it might just have been the last few years that people tried to do that.

Ioana-Marina Pantelici: *What were the biggest challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?*

Lujain Youssef: First, the money was one of the huge things – and to have everything aligned at the same time: to get the room, to talk to caterers, figure out how much money we might need and how much money, realistically, we can get, and then where to spend it. Whatever money you get, it comes with conditions. Another challenge is to try to make it as diversified of a conference as possible, to include and incorporate all different perspectives as well, and to come up with the structure for the entire thing.

Katerina Steffan: I think the issue is also that so many people are involved, which is frustrating. You cannot just plan ahead because you have to wait for someone to send a confirmation for money, or to send an email saying this and that. So that is really exasperating, especially because we have been quite a big group at the beginning, six or seven people. We tried to split the work as evenly as possible, which, on the one hand, made it more difficult because you constantly had to switch back and forth and ask, "What are you doing?" Especially when people dropped out, we were confronted with questions such as "Are you still doing this? Or are you not doing this? And when, what have you done already? Where are your files?" That was very difficult. I think the worst thing that happened was that we did not close the registration. We thought that it would be cool that people can register the whole time because we did not consider that we would have to know exact numbers for the caterer, for example. I contacted the caterers in June already, and they knew that we were going to have a conference and they knew that we would have approximately 40 people. I could only contact them a week before, and they were like, "Okay, well, we kind of have given up that space that we had for you now. You could have called earlier." But we did not have the numbers! So that was bad. We were lucky; one caterer called another caterer and asked for help, and we split the order – that was good. Even with the flyers: you cannot print the flyers. I mean you can print a lot of flyers, but it costs you more money if you print eighty instead of forty. Things like these were very frustrating.

Lujain Youssef: You also have to wait until the last minute because of people dropping out or new people turning up again – whether they were people who have registered or speakers. I mean,

nothing comes together until the very last moment. But at the same time, you need to start organizing way ahead of time. If you want to get the money, you need to already have numbers, people, a space, and everything in order. You already need to have those numbers, but those numbers were only finalized two days ago.

Katerina Steffan: Even money-wise. The folders that we have now, we did not want to have them. We actually wanted to print our own folders, but the more you order, the cheaper they get. S o, you would have to had known at the beginning too how many people there would be.

Lujain Youssef: There was a lot of improvisation also!

Katerina Steffan: And the thing is, we had a whole year, which is crazy. I have been thinking, "What did we do this whole year?" But we have been working on it the whole time. That is so many fingers and many bits that come together in the end.

Lujain Youssef: So, it was all in abstract terms, until the very last one or two weeks.

Ioana-Marina Pantelici: *Could you provide some insight into the decision-making process that led to the selection of "Spaces of Affect in the Americas" as the theme for PGF 2023?*

Lujain Youssef: I think we tried to find something that most of us were working on. Even if you do not work on it for your PhD, or a project, at least you would relate to it somehow. We thought – because we were initially seven people – if we find a topic that was inclusive enough to have all seven people relate to, then that would also be inclusive enough for other people from different universities. It was, again, like a brainstorming session. What could it be about? We then threw in some words about our individual projects and then found something that we could all agree on.

Katerina Steffan: I think we also felt that was something that everyone in the PGF can work with, too. Because even if you do not work in Affect Studies, obviously everyone who reads a novel will face the emotions in it. There will be spaces in it that you can discuss, and I do not think it is too big of a jump to think about this while you work on something else. Also, the topic is very present in academia, and so many people are working on Affect now. I do not think it has been done before. I think it was a good time to just address the topic in general.

Lujain Youssef: It is recent, it is provocative, and it is inclusive. Thus, we thought that it would be perfect for our conference. Decision-making-wise, we had meetings to update each other on what everyone was working on — not to vote on things, but just to propose some things and see what the others were thinking about them. There were some individual decisions in smaller, more practical manners, not the concept or the huge things, such as the program or the abstract. I mean, altogether we did organize it very well, amongst ourselves, but also for others.

Ioana-Marina Pantelici: *How did you approach the decision-making process when establishing categories for panels and sorting through the individual submissions?*

Lujain Youssef: Keywords. We had them, and then we read them. Instead of ranking them, we had these keywords to describe those abstracts. When we said that we want these abstracts to be

included, we started to shift and change the different panels. We initially approved of having five panels and distributing these abstracts into these five panels according to the theme or genre.

Katerina Steffan: Yes, but we also just met and thought about the different aspects: which abstracts do you feel work well together? Which ones have a similar idea or content? The goal was to see how we get them equally spaced throughout the three days.

Author Biographies

Adebola Ojo is currently pursuing a master's degree in Philosophy of Science at Leibniz University Hannover. He holds a bachelor's degree in PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) from Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. His research interests focus on Extended Cognition, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the epistemological questions that AI system raises. He currently takes part in *In Progress*'s editorial team.

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Interview with PGF Conference Keynote Speaker Anne Potjans (HU Berlin)

Conducted by Ioana-Marina Pantelici, Simge Irnak Çinar and Holly Fischer, transcribed by Adebola Ojo

Figure 1: Anne Potjans from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin talks about her experience as the Keynote Speaker at the 2023 PGF Conference "Spaces of Affect in the Americas." Watch the video of the full interview, edited by Mandana Vahebi, here: https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/yXGaL.

Interviewers: *So, thank you first of all for doing this interview with us.*

Anne Potjans: Of course, thanks for asking me!

Interviewers: *How do you feel about your first time as a keynote speaker at a conference?*

Anne Potjans: Oh wow, yeah! That was big somehow. I think for scholars, especially for emerging scholars and I guess also still in the latest stages, being a keynote at the conference is always one of those milestones in your career. When that happens, you know that there are people, other than the five people you usually talk to, interested in what you are doing. Of course, it is an honor to

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get that space to present your work and to be in touch with people about it! I was definitely very nervous before it, but I think this is something that just happens when you are supposed to speak in front of people. I guess you are always nervous and especially when you are called to be a keynote, you want to do a good job. But it was fun, I really enjoyed my time yesterday.

Interviewers: *What are you most passionate about in your research area? What has inspired you?*

Anne Potjans: That is a good question. I think that there are several things. For me sometimes the teaching can be very inspiring, to be in touch with people who are learning – that helps me to be okay with me still learning. So, when I am in the class I usually do not understand myself as much as the authority there, because that also puts a lot of pressure on you. I try to think of myself more as a facilitator or as somebody who is leading the discussion and usually a lot of fruitful things come out of that. So, that can be inspiring! Then I guess I take a lot of inspiration from all sorts of Black cultural productions because that is something I have become passionate about, Black academic contributions, cultural items. Also, thinking about how race works in the German context and the American context, what do we have to learn from both these contexts. I am also very interested in all things queer-related, and definitely also in things that are not necessary always so clear in their message. So, I like to dig around. I also really like to dig around in things that may not be so pretty. I'm interested in negative affect; I'm very interested in things that are maybe not necessarily very nice to look at. In my current project, I am also looking a little bit into BDSM culture and those things. I like gothic stuff; I like horror movies. Those are the kinds of things I am interested in!

Interviewers: *As a researcher in this field, how do you hope your work will contribute to a broader understanding of the emotional impact of literature on readers? Perhaps also regarding your keynote and Black anger.*

Anne Potjans: I think that there is a lot of knowledge out there about Black cultural productions, and a lot of people are working on it, and it is important. It is also important whether the persons themselves are black or white or whatever. At the same time, we do not have a lot of contributions in general from the people of color in the university space and we also do not have a lot of knowledge available from people who are in this field here in Germany, who are themselves black and who work on these topics. I think what I want to do with my work is to contribute a little bit to showing what changes when you approach these things from a specific subject position – in terms of experiential knowledge and maybe also in terms of an affinity to the materials through your lived experience. I am also really interested in thinking about how these things can contribute to a framework of knowledge production. So, last semester, I taught a class on Introduction to Black Studies, and I had a room of mostly white students. I want to be able to give them something to work with when they approach these topics, something that helps them understand their own positionality in relation to the topic, but then also for them to have some tools to work with. I try to introduce them to Black Studies as an analytic rather than something that is done by Black people and is defining for Blackness in an academic context. So, I want to really say: "What changes when we look at this material, from the vantage point of Black Studies theories?"

Interviewers: *What importance do you attribute to the representation of Black anger in various forms of media, in particular music?*

Anne Potjans: I think in recent years especially, we have seen that anger has become a driving political force that has been mobilized by several political parties in the US, but not just in the US. I think it has become important. People express a lot of discontent, a lot of anger about a lot of things. And what also became very apparent for me was that certain people get to do it and others do not. Anger is perceived in the public space very differently. It is funny because I am looking at this poster and it shows Hillary Clinton in a very sort of angry position, and it shows Trump in this one setting that he has, which is anger all the time! I am thinking about the way these two were perceived in the public sphere differently. But add Obama to that image, and I think you would probably have to look very hard to find an image of him being that angry in a public space. I mean stern and authoritative, yes, but not angry. That is for a reason! For black people, anger is a very difficult thing to approach. I think white people often fear people of color's anger because they know that their anger has a reason. They do not actively know it, but I think they do know it in some form, and that this anger can potentially be dangerous to the white supremacist worldview, and so it becomes suppressed. Or it is very actively being suppressed. Talking about anger in the first place was for me important to highlight that this is something that we must be able to attribute and give to the Black people, that they can be angry, that they can be humans. At the same time with music, I just love music, that is really just an interest. I grew up on hip hop, it is still my favorite kind of music. It was very interesting to me the whole time to touch that, but then I was thinking I do not really know how to talk about music, because you also do not get taught how to do it. Usually, we are not musicologists so there is a limit to what we can do other than just looking at the lyrics which are like poetry. I just wanted to try it out, I guess it was just an attempt to see how I can approach this. And after yesterday I think I want to do more of it.

Interviewers: *How do you feel about working in academia? What do you enjoy most about it? What are the challenges (even when writing your dissertation)?*

Anne Potjans: I think one of the challenges is actually both a challenge and the part that I enjoy most. I still get to structure my time relatively freely. I have things, of course, throughout the week and I am now on the post-doc-level. I work in a research group, which means that we have weekly meetings, we have administrative responsibilities in the group. I also teach, I have two research projects that I am doing, I am working on something for the projects. Then I have to think about putting together *habil* and only saying it makes me exasperate! I can still think about when a good time is to do my reading, when a good time is for me to do my writing, how much time do I want to invest in teaching. I can do a lot of organizing by myself. At the same time that can also be the downside because I am somebody who works a lot with outside motivation. When somebody looks at me and says, "I am going to be really disappointed if you are not doing that", you can be very sure I am going to sit down and do it. However, when people tell me, "Oh no! Take your time," that is really my "death sentence." Then I am going to be on my couch. I think while writing my dissertation, it was also a problem that I started writing a little late in the process. I thought about it, and I read, and I went to conferences, and did all the things. There are things that always feel a bit more immediate. Teaching is always immediate, because you have to do it every week, so you are going to be more inclined to put preparation into that. Then you will think about your dissertation and tell yourself "I have six years to do this so maybe not this week." I think this is a bit of a challenge when you are like me and work a lot by being given motivation from outside influences; then it is not always so easy to structure yourself. I think you can learn it; I think I have also gotten better at it. I have also accepted my own inclination to always cut it really close and I

have my peace with that. I mean this is something I am still working on; how do I use my time most efficiently also so I can rest? When you have a lot to do and you are not doing it, then it interferes very much with your feeling of having downtime.

Interviewers: *How organized are you in your research? What is your working method?*

Anne Potjans: I know there are a lot of people who have ideas and then they write them out, and they already start structuring them. I am not like that. I always need information to get to that point. The first thing that I do is research and reading. Then, ideally, I have a little bit of time to let it simmer to formulate my own thoughts. Then I get to this point where I feel I can write and I cannot waste time. I have realized that this point will come when I do certain things, when I read, when I think about it, and then when I start making notes. I always have to print everything, as I am a very haptic person; and at some point, there is writing. There is a bit of overlap between reading more and writing, and I am not sure if this is really a method. These are the steps I have been able to trace in my process, these things always occur and mostly in that order.

Interviewers: *How do you maintain your motivation and enthusiasm while working in the academic field?*

Anne Potjans: I think very realistically speaking, it is impossible to maintain it the whole time. You also need to be okay with sometimes not feeling motivated, and I think it is very normal. I mean at the end of the day it is a job! It is a job that is not unimportant on many levels, you can do important things with it, but it is a job. It is what pays your bills. So, it is also okay to lose a bit of that enthusiasm when you are tired, when you are not feeling well, or when you have problems or issues on the private level that take over for a long time. Then you probably won't feel as inspired. What usually does get me out of a period of not feeling motivated or even asking myself, "Why am I even doing this? Is anybody ever going to give me a job?" Or not a job, I have a job, but a job that I can keep until I am retiring. It is a lot of work. And you know you have all these questions, and sometimes they creep up on you because it is reality. What usually gets me out of that is to have people around me that I can talk to, not only people from the academic setting. I talk to my parents who have nothing to do with academia whatsoever, I play with their cat, I talk to friends who are also not in academia, and we talk about something completely unrelated. I do sports, I go to the gym, I go swimming and those things also help keep me sane ... sleeping as well; and the mindset "Well then, I'm just going to be on my couch and watch Netflix" on a Saturday. You need to be rested; you cannot do this when you are constantly tired. Then you will get frustrated. So, when that point comes, you just have to think, "Okay! I'm tired and I am motivated". This is what it is for now, and now I am maybe going to do 70% and another time 100%, and at another point in time I would do 150% when it is asked of me or when I feel good, but right now this is all I can give. It usually also changes again!

Interviewers: *What job outside of academia would you consider if you had the opportunity?*

Anne Potjans: I was always very interested in psychology, and I would really like to do something with that. I had thought about pursuing a second career if my job constellation now would have been different. Now it is not, so I am not doing that, but I think that would have been something that would have interested me, becoming a therapist. Maybe as a side note: I have done therapy myself and I was always really interested in seeing how, aside from the fact that I was happy that people were helping me, this process works and what it is doing to me. I think psychologists also are a big part of literary analysis, they are a big part of cultural analysis. This, [i.e., the concepts of]

affect and feeling are all partially rooted in psychology. So, I think this is very related; that is the other thing I could see myself doing.

Interviewers: *What advice do you have for aspiring scholars and researchers who are interested in pursuing a career focused on the emotional dimensions of the literary space?*

Anne Potjans: I think you have to be realistic about what is coming your way, in the sense that academia, at a point in time, and where it is right now, does not necessarily provide many situations where you would have a good funding situation. If you want to pursue this, you have to be certain that you want to do this for an extended period of time. It can also be very different; I had a lot of luck; I have always had a good funding situation and I think it has also become much better. Contracts have been given out that are no longer only a year or two – they are usually longer than that. However, you have to be very conscious of the fact that for a longer time, you will not be unprecariously employed. That is definitely one thing, and you also have to be able to find some joy in the writing process. If you feel like you are somebody who does not like writing, then you probably would have a hard time with this. This is not to discourage anyone; it is just to say these are the realities of it. I think you also have to be a little pragmatic about your writing, so you have to be very conscious about the fact that when you are writing a book, especially when you are writing a dissertation, it has to be recognizable as a work of scholarship and follow certain parameters – you cannot write a novel. You have to follow scholarly guidelines. Perfectionism is always the killer of everything, which I can see in practice and theory, but I know that my practice is sometimes also different. I have become a little more pragmatic throughout writing my dissertation because, as I keep saying, I cut it really close. I had to make many pragmatic decisions to get it done. That has been helpful for me, because right now I know I can make these pragmatic decisions and I do not have to go back and forth – as in cutting out pages, for example. I think these are tips I can give. Also, I cannot say this enough, but make sure that your physical and psychological wellbeing remain intact. Choose your battle, choose the things that you are passionate about, and make sure you do not abandon the things in your private life that make you happy because you will need that to lean on sometimes.

Author Biographies

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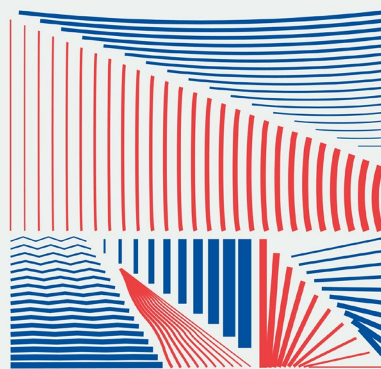

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