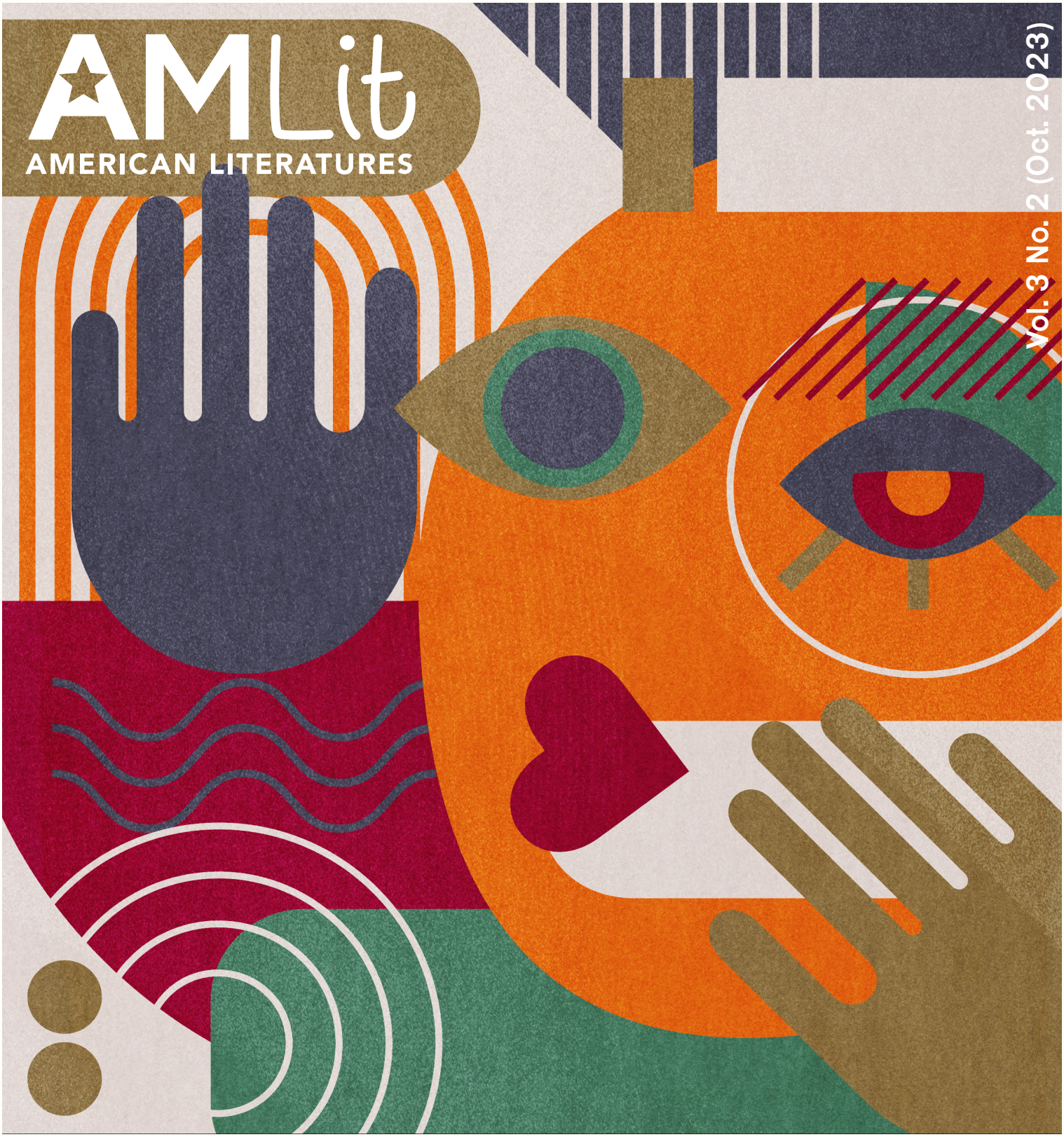
AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES
Vol. 3 No. 2 (Oct. 2023)



Body Politics in North American Literary Fictions

Stefan L. Brandt, Frank Mehring, and Tatiani G. Rapatzikou
(Guest Editors)

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AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES

Imprint

Design Verena Repar
Cover Design Georg Gruber

Typesetting Lisa Buchegger
Copyediting Georg Gruber, Veronika Rom

Media Owner University of Graz
Universitätsplatz 3
8010 Graz
Austria

ISSN 2789-889X

AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES

Content

Introduction:

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Keywords Body Politics; Identity Formation; Intersectionality; North American Literary Fictions; Power Dynamics; Symbolic Significance.

"The love of the body of man or woman balks account,
the body itself balks account."

Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric" (128)

The human body has been described in diverse—and sometimes contradictory—ways across cultures. Travis Foster claims that the body can be viewed "as a biological entity, clothing for the soul, a site of cultural production, a psychosexual construct, and a material encumbrance" (1). Bodies serve as places of identification and representation, through which basic parameters of a given culture can be negotiated, reviewed, and adapted. Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that bodies are not solely material entities but are constructed through language and discourse. Regulatory norms of sex and gender shape the body and establish power dynamics (Butler viii–xxx). This view of the body as a "battleground" (as referenced in Barbara Kruger's famous piece of conceptual art) has fundamentally challenged the traditional understanding of the body as a pre-existing, natural entity, emphasizing its significance in the realm of politics and identity formation.

During the COVID pandemic, the body resurfaced as a central topic in identity politics, laying bare the vulnerability of physical bodies and the significance of the represented body. "Bodies are contested sites of global politics that are acted upon and act relentlessly in life and beyond—to the point of their continual redoing and undoing" (Purnell 1). This multifaceted

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.1

perspective has sparked considerable exploration in various fields of research, including anthropology, environmental studies, history, literature, media studies, politics, theology, and psychology. Scholars within these disciplines have engaged in critical analyses of the formation of identities and subject positions, delving into the representations and narratives surrounding the human body. However, due to its inherent nature as a contested and ever-changing entity, attempts to fully comprehend the body have proven notoriously difficult (see Hillman and Maude 1–9), echoing Walt Whitman's sentiment in his poem "I Sing the Body Electric": "the body itself balks account" (128).

This special issue of *AmLit*, titled *Body Politics in North American Literary Fictions*, offers a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between the human body and politics in a diverse range of North American literary works. By exploring the nuanced portrayals of the body within these narratives, this essay collection provides profound insights into the body as a contested site where power dynamics, social constructions, and acts of resistance intersect. In North American literary fictions, the body becomes a charged terrain embodying, negotiating, and challenging political ideologies. It serves as a canvas reflecting social and cultural contexts, where different forms of power are inscribed and contested. These narratives encourage readers to critically engage with the politicization of bodies and their reciprocal influence on the prevailing political landscapes. As this collection demonstrates, the body assumes symbolic significance in North American literature, often functioning as a metaphor for larger sociopolitical issues. Characters' bodies are imbued with meaning beyond their physicality, becoming vehicles through which authors explore and critique social hierarchies, systemic oppression, and cultural prejudices. Consequently, the body represents a powerful tool for authors to navigate and challenge prevailing power structures, offering readers a lens to examine the intricate interplay between corporeality and politics.

Body politics in North American literary fictions encompass not only individual bodies but also collective bodies, such as communities or social groups. Bodies emerge as sites in which historical narratives are engraved (Trouillot 560). They illuminate how bodies collectively mobilize and resist dominant power structures. Characters from marginalized communities utilize their bodies as sites of resistance, subverting societal norms and power imbalances (see e.g., Brown 2013, Brandt 2007, Mossner, Mikić, and Grill 2022, Teuton 2022). Through acts of protest, performance, or reclaiming agency over their bodies, these characters disrupt established power dynamics and assert their identities and autonomy. Furthermore, North American literary fictions often address the intersectional nature of body politics, exploring how

different aspects of identity—such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability—intersect with the body and shape experiences of power and marginalization (see Collins and Bilge 2). These accounts reveal the complex ways in which bodies are racialized, gendered, and sexualized, underscoring the impact of intersecting power structures on individuals' lived experiences. By exposing the embodied nature of discrimination and oppression, these works invite readers to critically examine how bodies are both shaped by and resist multiple forms of oppression.

This volume comprises five illuminating articles that explore various facets of body politics through the lens of diverse narrative forms, such as dystopian novels, non-fiction, and science fiction. Each textual manifestation unveils a plethora of body representations, offering insights into different aspects of subjectivity formation and examination. The contributions within this issue shed light on the symbolic significance of colors, delve into the impact of epidemics on marginalized communities, explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of self-expression, and examine the performative nature of age and gender. Each article presents unique perspectives that enrich our comprehension of the intricate relationship between the body and politics in North American literary fictions. They reveal the depth and richness of the discussions that emerge when exploring themes related to the body. From symbolic representations to critical analyses, this collection opens up a prolific and multilayered field of discussion, emphasizing the significance of body themes in contemporary literature and society.

The articles highlight an essential aspect, namely that, beyond the bodies portrayed in the primary sources, there are also the bodies of the readers engaging with the narratives under examination. Consequently, the embodied experiences conveyed through these stories are absorbed by readers' own bodies, which possess distinct temporal, spatial, and cultural understandings of the world. As a result, each narrative being analyzed transcends its own storyline, aiming to establish both intellectual and sensory connections with the readers themselves. This interaction goes beyond the mere storyline, profoundly influencing their diverse socio-cultural and political perceptions while enhancing their comprehension of a wide array of topics. These subjects encompass everything from issues of sexual and racial discrimination to the trauma caused by epidemics, the realm of psychoanalysis, and the exclusion experienced with aging. In essence, this volume reveals the profound impact of literature on readers' lives, as the narratives not only entertain but also provoke contemplation and introspection. By bridging the gap between the depicted characters and the readers, these literary texts foster a deeper understanding of complex societal issues, urging us to critically reflect on the world we inhabit.

Lisa Buchegger's article "'In Burning Red'—Red as the Color of Female Shame in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" delves into the color symbolism employed in Atwood's renowned novel. Focusing on the color red, it explores how it functions as a marker of shame and sin for the female protagonists, particularly the handmaids. By contrasting the color-coded women in the novel and drawing on biblical imagery, the essay reveals how the association of lust and sin with the color red highlights the reduction of women to their bodies and sexual identities, exposing the underlying hypocrisy within the novel's dystopian society.

Anna Ferrari's contribution, "The Obsessive Body: David B. Feinberg's Attempts at Distance while Facing the AIDS Epidemic," examines the role of the body in the works of New York author David B. Feinberg, who grappled with the traumatic experience of the AIDS epidemic. Analyzing both his fiction and non-fiction, the essay demonstrates how the theme of the body becomes a means for Feinberg to provoke reactions, cope with trauma, and address the stigmatization of PWAs. By exploring key concepts such as humor, political subversion, and the negotiation of cleanliness, the paper highlights the significant place of Feinberg's work within AIDS literature.

Giulia Magro's "Blackness as Infectious: Racialized Plagues and Anti-Plagues in Anglo-American Works of Science Fiction" reveals the long-existing connection between fears of contagious diseases and racial discrimination, which becomes especially virulent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an analysis of anglophone science fictional films and novels, the article explores a problematic narrative trope that links infectious diseases with racial contamination, often portraying black people as the culprits of contagion. However, it also examines Ishmael Reed's Afrofuturist novel *Mumbo Jumbo* as a contrasting narrative that redefines infectiousness as a tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans, emphasizing the power of collective movements for social and racial justice.

In "A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Fabiola Mazzola challenges the controversial interpretations surrounding the protagonist's suicide in the aforementioned novel. Taking a psychoanalytic perspective, the essay argues that Edna's suicide should be seen as a triumph rather than a failure. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of the abject and Freudian writings, it posits that Edna's awakening and confrontation with societal constraints lead her to liberate the deepest drives of her unconscious through this ultimate act of self-expression.

In "'The stock character of a middle-aged woman?' Rediscovering *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* through Age and Gender Performance," Marta Miquel-Baldellou explores the performative nature of aging and its parallels with gender performance. Referencing the works of Anne Basting, Katharine

Woodward, Margaret Gullette, and Deborah Jermyn, the article emphasizes the significance of analyzing the portrayal of older actresses in narratives centered around performance and aging. Specifically focusing on the character of Karen Stone in Tennessee Williams's novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, the paper examines the social responses arising from her refusal to conform to societal expectations of aging, highlighting the character's ability to both challenge and resist constructed norms of age and gender.

In all the cases examined above, the body serves as a locus of action and reaction, upon which attitudes, perceptions of power, and diverse socio-cultural ideologies of gender and race are reflected or inscribed. Whether portrayed as weak or empowered, excluded or embraced, sickened or healed, the body becomes a tangible conduit through which multiple paths of exploration and negotiation are paved. Every literary text examined in this collection of essays acts as a mediator bridging external reality and embodied experience. Readers' engagement with this diverse terrain of socio-cultural and socio-political activity enriches the overall experience conveyed through multiple points of view. These perspectives emerge from how each writer crafts narratives, characters, and means of expression. Moreover, the body itself provides a tangible foundation for living experiences, enabling their immersion into a heterogeneous and diverse reality.

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Biography

Stefan L. Brandt is Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz and former President of the Austrian Association for American Studies. After receiving his Ph.D. and Venia Legendi at Freie Universität Berlin, he was awarded lecturer positions at University of Chemnitz and University of Bochum as well as professorial positions at Freie Universität Berlin, University of Siegen, and University of Vienna. He was affiliated—on the research and teaching level—with numerous other universities, among them Università Ca' Foscari, Radboud Universiteit, University of Toronto, and Harvard University. Brandt has talked and written on a wide range of topics in American Cultural Studies, having published four monographs—among them *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America, 1945–1960* (Winter, 2007), and *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)—and (co-)edited eight anthologies, most recently *In-Between: Liminal Spaces in Canadian Literature and Culture* (2017) (Lang Canadiana Series), *Space Oddities: Difference and Identity in the American City* (2018) (LIT Verlag, with Michael Fuchs), and *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating New Forms of Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (2019) (Lexington Books, with Rubén Cenamor). Brandt is currently working on a book project dealing with the transatlantic origins of U.S. formation literature (*Burgeoning Selves: Transatlantic Dialogue and Early American Bildungsliteratur, 1776–1860*). He is also one of the founding members of the European research network 'Digital Studies' (https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643-eaas-digital-studies-network) (together with Frank Mehring and Tatiani G. Rapatzikou).

Frank Mehring is Professor of American Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen. His research focuses on cultural transfer, migration, intermediality, and the function of music in transnational cultural contexts. In 2012, he received the Rob Kroes Award for his monograph *The Democratic Gap* (2014). His publications include *Sphere Melodies* (2003) on the intersection of literature and music in the work of Charles Ives and John Cage, *The Soundtrack of Liberation* (2015) on WWII sonic diplomacy, *Sound and Vision: Intermediality and American Music* (2018, with Erik Redling), *The Politics and Cultures of Liberation* (2018, with Hans Bak and Mathilde Roza), or *Islamophobia and Inter/Multimedial Dissensus* (2020, with Elena Furlanetto). Mehring unearthed a new visual archive of transatlantic modernism with articles, lectures, exhibitions, editions, and catalogues such as *The Mexico Diary: Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance* (2016) and *The Multicultural Modernism of Winold Reiss* (2022). With Tatiani G. Rapazikou and Stefan L. Brandt, he is the co-founder of the European Digital Studies Network and the online journal *AmLit—American Literatures*. He organized the first performance of the Marshall Plan opera *La Sterlina Dollarosa* and co-curated exhibitions on Winold Reiss, Joseph Beuys, the Marshall Plan, and Liberation Songs in Kleve, New York, Nijmegen, and The Hague.

Biography

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou is Associate Professor at the Department of American Literature and Culture, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTh), Greece. She holds a B.A. from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, while for her graduate studies she holds an M.A. from Lancaster University and a Ph.D. from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K. (funded by the Board of Greek State Scholarships Foundation, I.K.Y). She was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the M.I.T. Comparative Media Studies program (2009). She has received various fellowships: the Arthur Miller Centre Award (2000), the BAAS Short Term Travel Award (2000), the British Library Eccles Centre for American Studies Visiting Fellowship (2020). She was a Visiting Research Scholar at the Program in Literature at Duke University, U.S. (2012), the Department of English at York University, Toronto, Canada (2016, 2022), and the Department of Fine Arts & Humanities, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta, Canada (2022). She has written the monograph titled *Gothic Motifs in the Fiction of William Gibson* (Rodopi 2004), while she recently co-edited: *Ethnicity and Gender Debates: Cross-Readings of the United States of America in the New Millennium* (Peter Lang 2020); *Visualizing America* (Hellenic Association for American Studies Digital Publications, National Documentation Center 2021); and the special journal issue *The Cultural Politics of Space* (2020: *Gramma, Journal of Theory and Criticism*). She is one of the founding members of two online peer/blind review journals (*Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* and *AmLit: American Literatures*) and of the EAAS Digital Studies Network (together with Stefan Brandt and Frank Mehring). Between 2019 and 2022, she served as the Director of the Digital Humanities Lab "Psifis" (AUTh). Her teaching and research deal with: contemporary American literature, postmodern writing practice, cyberpunk/cyberculture/cybergothic (William Gibson), electronic literature, print and digital materialities.

‘In Burning Red’ –

Red as the Color of Female Shame in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Lisa Buchegger
University of Graz

Abstract

This paper explores the color symbolism employed in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It argues that the color red is used to mark the female protagonists—the handmaids—as shameful, sinful outcasts, and compares and contrasts them to the other color-coded women (mainly, the ‘blue’ wives) in the novel, shedding light on how this color-coding reflects connotations of red that tie it to the female body and female sexuality. This is achieved by playing on the ever-so-prominent social and cultural construction of women being trapped in a caste system, in which they are either ‘sacred mothers,’ ‘sinful sexual objects,’ or no ‘real women’ at all. The essay furthermore demonstrates that *The Handmaid's Tale*, which depicts a Christian fundamentalist regime, employs (post-)biblical imagery to support the association of lust and sin with the color red. Finally, the article outlines that *The Handmaid's Tale* unearths the hypocrisy inherent in female denunciation by showing how the color red is used in the story to highlight the discrepancies that define a society in which women are reduced to their bodies and their functions as sexual beings.

Keywords

Caste System; Christian Fundamentalism; Color-Coding; Dystopian Fiction; Female Body; Margaret Atwood; Sexuality.

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.2

Introduction

"[…] [W]hen we're trying to move on," Taylor Swift writes in the prologue to her 2012 hit album Red, in which she deals with overwhelming heartbreak and lost love, "the moments we always go back to aren't the mundane ones. […] They are […] moments of newfound hope, extreme joy, intense passion, wishful thinking, and in some cases, the unthinkable letdown. And in my mind, every one of these memories looks the same to me. I see all of these moments in bright, burning, red."[1]

For ages, red has been one of the most heavily connoted colors across cultures, standing both for concepts and (intense) emotions. It is associated with heat (think, for example, of the red markers on a faucet to symbolize hot water), affection, and love (most prominently symbolized through a red heart icon), but also with lust, sin, and shame, particularly in connection to the female body.

The latter holds true for the 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This dystopian story takes readers to the future in the American Republic of Gilead, where everything is organized in strict adherence to the Bible by a powerful fraction of Christian fundamentalists, calling themselves the 'Sons of Jacob.' Women are no longer individuals with their own rights, but they are put in a strict caste system according to their functions. Within this caste system, they are marked by colors: Young, fertile women are turned into handmaids, dressed in red robes, and forced to become 'breeding machines' for powerful Commanders, whose barren wives are dressed in blue. Employed in these households are also so-called Marthas, who wear green and work as servants. The trainers of the handmaids are referred to as Aunts, depicted in brown attire. In this book, the colors assigned to the different 'fractions' of women take on highly symbolic meanings, and it is particularly the color red that marks its bearers as sinful, shameful outcasts.[2]

This essay will show how color symbolism operates in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It will analyze the use of the color red in association with the shunned handmaids and their social exclusion. Furthermore, it will discuss the emotional values and connotations that come with the color red, and how they are applicable to Atwood's text.[3] The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the color red operates as the color of exclusion and shame in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and to show that this effect is achieved by employing the red color imagery in scenes in which the handmaids are clearly separated and excluded from the rest of the society. By examining the various connotations that come with the color red, it will be shown that *The Handmaid's Tale* picks up those associations that have to do with shame, sin, and the female body. Even though the denounced and excluded characters consist of an entire group, the following analysis will mainly focus on Offred, the female

protagonist, who, due to her affiliation as a handmaid, can stand for this entire group when examining how the color red marks its members as 'the Others.' This paper will also outline that the color red as a signifier of shame is used in a highly contradictory manner in the novel, and that it can thus be read as a symbol for the dystopian world Atwood depicts, which is full of hypocrisy and discrepancy.

All Is Red in Love and War — The Symbolic Meanings of Red

Colors are largely symbolic—they stand for certain concepts and emotions, which have been established by conventions and traditions over time. As Simona Petru states, "[s]ymbols strongly influence our feelings, just as colour does. So colours have the potential to be very powerful symbols" (203). It is important to note, though, that the connotations of colors are not necessarily identical in all cultures and across time. While Ancient Egypt associated red with the protection of the dead, it was the color that symbolized power in Rome. In China, on the other hand, it stands for luck and longevity, while the Bible renders red as the color associated with sin[4], and post-biblical, cultural constructs stemming from the Middle Ages onwards have added the well-known imagery of a blazing red 'hell,' the 'home' of the Devil. Also, wars, as well as political radicalism, can be expressed through red by drawing on images of blood and violence (Allan 631; Greenfield 1-2; Parikh 65-66). It is thus fair to say that "traditional meanings attached to colors vary from time to time and from place to place" (Parikh 66). What can be stated for sure, however, is that the associations that colors trigger in us have the power to influence our feelings, perceptions, and overall mood (Ott and Mack 138).

Red is not only one of the most heavily connoted colors in history but—linguistically speaking—also one of the oldest. Petru (203, 206) states that, after black and white, red was the third term defined by language to denote a color.[5] The author has found that as early as in the Upper Paleolithic, there might have been a symbolic relationship between the color red and the female body. She further suggests that the color probably stood for transformation, as in the transformation that the body of a woman goes through during pregnancy. This would undoubtedly apply to *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the primary duty of the red-clothed women is to become pregnant and bear children for the elite families of Gilead.

Nowadays, red is mostly known as the traditional color of love, best exemplified by the various red images of hearts. Danger, violence, courage, as well as lust, passion, and desire are only a few other connotations that come with this color. Interestingly, red has long been worn by rulers and thus became associated with power, high status, and dominance, all of which are stereotypically masculine characteristics. In the nineteenth and twentieth

century, the age of conservative Victorianism, however, red slowly started to be put on one level with vulgarity (Greenfield 2-4, 217-18, 260; Jonauskaite et al. 1-2; Roland 13). Scarlet became a signifier of sexual sin, as "red's association with male power had waned" and "its age-old identification with passion and [female] sexuality came to the fore" (Greenfield 217). By the beginning of the twentieth century, "the red dress became a fixture" in works of fiction, "a sure sign that a woman was an adulteress, an adventuress, or a prostitute, or headed in some way for a sexual fall. [...] Bold and bad, the fictional woman in red often ended up shunned, abandoned, or dead" (Greenfield 254-55). It can thus be said that red is a color that triggers both positive and negative associations; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the latter prevail. It is the handmaids' sexuality that makes them 'lustful' and 'dangerous,' and, as a consequence, turns them into outcasts (Cerrato 4-5).

The color red is also commonly linked with images of blood—"life-blood, the blood of the slain, or menstrual blood" (Allan 626)—all of which find their expressions in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but, as their sole purpose is to bear children, particularly the association of red with menstrual blood (and thus, fertility) is what fosters the denunciation and exclusion of these women in Atwood's dystopia (Thompson 32). In Offred's words, "everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (Atwood 14). The connection between red and systemic denunciation becomes even clearer when taking into account that the handmaids are solely limited to and acknowledged because of their reproductive organs, which, in turn, makes them property of the state (Rubenstein 116-17). The Gileadean regime thus takes all kinds of individuality from the fertile women, making them dependent on their wombs and wishing for the absence of menstrual blood:

> Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own. I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. [...] Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am, and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (Atwood 79-80)

Not Just Black and White — Color-Coding and Marking Women According to Their Functions in *The Handmaid's Tale*

To fully grasp the importance of the color red in Atwood's novel, it is imperative to put it in relation to other prominent colors and their meanings in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the Republic of Gilead, everyone is color-coded, and these colors all stand for certain functions and qualities. This caste system is particularly evident (and confining) with regard to the female characters, who

are clothed according to their professions and the duties they assume within the regime.[6]

The colors are so prevalent that Atwood makes Offred refer to her 'group' as "bundles of red cloth" (Atwood 133), showing how they are fully deprived of their individuality. They are solely defined by their clothes and what they stand for. Similarly, Offred's shopping partner, Ofglen, is described by the protagonist as "[a] shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket" (Atwood 24). The woman as a person is "nondescript," and all that makes her who she is are her red-colored clothes. When Rita, a servant in the house in which Offred 'works' as a handmaid, frowns at her, Offred contemplates that "the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck" (Atwood 15-16). These examples illustrate that the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are merely defined by their functions and the colors that represent them, rather than any personality traits that would make them individual human beings (Roland 6).

Even the protagonist's name—Offred—has "red" in it. She is part *of* the *red* group of women. While, within the story, it is a reference to the character's loss of identity and marks her as the possession of Commander Fred (the handmaid "of-Fred"), David Ketterer interprets the name as a potentially "rebellious[7] reference to her red habit" (210). Offred, then, remarks that "[s]ome people call them [their dresses] *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break" (Atwood 30). Just like the handmaids are thoroughly defined by their red clothes, and cannot separate their identities from them, they cannot escape the negative connotations of red projected upon them and the resulting social exclusion. In fact, the color red even appears in the scene that marks Offred's 'demise' into a powerless handmaid, subject to the oppressive Republic of Gilead. In a flashback, she recalls going to a store to buy cigarettes, shortly before the Sons of Jacob fully took over. Since women were suddenly forbidden to administrate their own money, Offred finds her card being invalid: "It's not valid.," the cashier keeps repeating to Offred, "[s]ee that red light? Means it's not valid" (Atwood 181). The red light signalizes both the end of her access to money, as well as the end of her personal freedom, and the beginning of her existence as a handmaid and outcast (Roland 27).

The Aunts are the ones who accompany the handmaids on their 'rites of passage' from individuals to sexual slaves by training and instructing them in their duties. They are defined by the color brown and thus wear a color that is mostly associated with strength and seriousness, which are traits commonly allotted to masculinity (Cerrato 20). This, too, is fitting for their purpose within the story, as they take on instructor-like, almost military roles. Furthermore, this group consists of either sterile women or women past the childbearing age.

Since "dying vegetation goes brown" (Allan 630), these Aunts display their lack of fertility through their color-coded clothes.

The household servants, also called Marthas, wear dresses of "dull green" (Atwood 15). As defined by Herman Cerrato (9-10), green can stand for adaptability, flexibility, and nurture—all of which would be expected of servants –, but it is also associated with envy, which is fitting for the Marthas readers encounter in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred overhears the Marthas gossiping about the handmaids and their childbearing function, stating that "they're doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work" (Atwood 16). This passage suggests that the Martha Cora is jealous of Offred and her position, and thus, it resonates with the association of the color green with jealousy.

Blue, the color of the wives, has increased in popularity ever since the nineteenth century (Greenfield 256). Cerrato, who examined colors with regard to their meanings and associations in a business context, states that this color is very efficiently used when promoting products that are related to cleanliness, such as cleaning liquids or water purification filters (11-13). He also argues that it is a color often associated with piety and coolness, as well as with conservatism, loyalty, faith, and heaven. Furthermore, recalling the famous saying that someone is of 'blue blood,' blue is also a symbol of aristocracy (Allan 633; Parikh 66). All these associations are applicable to the Commanders' blue-clothed wives in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are loyal to the oppressive system of Gilead and to their husbands, and they believe in the Christian fundamentalist regime. Towards the handmaids, they appear distant ('cool') and superior. Offred describes the eye color of Serena Joy, the wife of Commander Fred, as "the flat hostile blue of a midsummer sky in bright sunlight, a blue that shuts you out" (Atwood 21), evoking a sense of coldness, as well as delineating how Serena is above Offred in the hierarchical system of Gilead. While a hell-imagery of danger, passion, and sin is used for the red handmaids, the wives are 'pure,' and recall notions of heaven (the 'place' reserved for non-sinful people). This is due to their lack of engagement in sexual activities and their inability to give birth to children. Blue is also the color in which the Madonna is dressed in most of her paintings, which underlines the link between this color and the idea of purity and virtuousness (Allan 633).

This juxtaposition of the 'pure' wives and 'dirty' handmaids is a manifestation of the so-called Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy,[8] which "denotes polarized perceptions of women […] as either 'good,' chaste […] Madonnas or as 'bad,' promiscuous, and seductive whores," and

> can be traced from the ancient Greeks […] through later Western literature […], art […], as well as contemporary films […] and television series […]. Still prevalent in the West […], this dichotomy also occurs in non-Western cultures—in Latin and South America […] and in the Middle East and East Asia […]—where female chastity is integral to family honor. (Bareket et al. 519)

This omnipresent categorization of women into two distinct 'sections' demonstrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* comments on contemporary realities and extrapolates them. In the novel, one 'group' is virtuous and sexless, personified by Gilead's blue wives, while the other is sexy and sinful, exemplified by the red handmaids. Even though the handmaids are needed in order to bear children instead of the infertile wives, and it is thus not male stereotyping that makes the latter 'sexless,' the clear distinction between them still functions as a symbol for and representation of opposing attitudes towards women as either chaste and suitable for motherhood, or sexually active and thus objectified and reduced to their bodies, which — in *The Handmaid's Tale* — are literal "interchangeable instruments" (Bareket et al. 521) for men.

Cerrato (4, 11) outlines that the color red has been proven to stimulate the appetite, which, in the case of the handmaids, can be transferred to the sexual appetite they evoke in men. Blue, on the other hand, is an appetite suppressant. Similarly, the wives are only supposed to be the mothers of the children born by the handmaids, but not the ones who are 'contaminated' by engaging in sexual activities or by evoking sexual appetite in their husbands.

The distinction between different 'kinds' of women is negotiated in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the colors the women wear, and what these colors stand for. It also goes hand in hand with the hierarchically superior group shunning those below them. This is most fittingly described by Offred during an event where both wives and handmaids are present:

> A number of Wives are already seated, in their best embroidered blue. We can feel their eyes on us as we walk in our red dresses two by two across to the side opposite them. We are being looked at, assessed, whispered about […]. Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope […]. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen […]. (Atwood 221-22)

Harlots, Tulips. and Hypocrites — Red as a 'Shame-Signifier' in *The Handmaid's Tale*

If the blue wives are modeled after the sacred Madonna image, and the red handmaids stand for temptation and sin, it is needless to say that these color-coded women are marked by drawing on references from the Bible. That the society of Gilead is organized in strict adherence to the Holy Scripture is illustrated most strikingly with regard to the function of the handmaids: In a monthly 'Ceremony,' they are forced to lie down between the legs of the barren wives as the Commanders penetrate them so they can bear children for them. This Ceremony is based on a passage in the Book of Genesis, in which Rachel presents Jacob with her maid, Bilhah, who, in her place, conceives Jacob's children and gives birth to them on Rachel's knees.

In the Republic of Gilead, the verses from the Bible are taken literally. As is the case with this ceremony being a literal 'enactment' of the story of Rachel and Jacob, the negative connotations of red that appear in the Bible are equally present in Gilead. The place where the handmaids are trained for their new positions is named "The Rachel and Leah Centre" (after the biblical personae); however, Offred refers to it as "Red Centre [...] because there was so much red" (Atwood 103). In this "Red Centre," the women are little by little deprived of their individuality and turned into sexual slaves, who, while being needed for securing Gilead's offspring, are turned into an ostracized, shamed, and shunned group of society. The most striking reference to (post-)biblical imagery connecting red with shame and sin can be found in the scene at Jezebel's,[9] a brothel in which Offred spots a woman "who's in red spangles with a long pointed tail attached, and silver horns; a devil outfit" (Atwood 247). That the woman in red wears a "devil outfit" unequivocally refers to culturally established images of Satan and hell, often depicted with blazing red flames and symbolic of moral misconduct (Greenfield 22). These sinful, red women work in an institution that, in itself, is associated with the color red. The locations of brothels are often subsumed under the term "red light milieu," and tend to employ red lights "as beacons for their trade" (Allan 632). The infamous Whore of Babylon, which, in Revelation 17, is described as sitting "upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy," and referred to as "the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth [...] drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (qtd. in Allan 632) makes the transfer of the biblical equation of red with shame and sin to the 'fallen women' in Atwood's text even clearer.

Even though the red handmaids are never officially labeled prostitutes, they are also associated with seduction and sexual misconduct reminiscent of biblical imagery of sin and hell, which adds to their perception as a shunned group of Gileadean society. After Offred has met two young Guardians, she contemplates:

> [...] I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like [...] teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it [...]. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. (Atwood 28)

In this passage, Atwood delineates Offred's consciousness of her own sexuality, and how she believes to be perceived by her surroundings because of her red attire. She feels her "red skirt sway[ing] around her," which is directly linked to her small act of seduction when she "moves" her "hips a little." Also, she is torn

between feeling ashamed, as it would correspond to the indoctrination by the society of Gilead, and not feeling ashamed at all, but instead enjoying her small 'rebellion' against the code of conduct she usually has to adhere to (Roland 11).

Apart from direct references to sexual activities and seduction in combination with the color red, Atwood also employs a seemingly 'innocent' red symbol for the handmaids, namely the tulips Offred sees in Serena Joy's garden. These flowers symbolize the handmaids as an entire group, as well as their menstrual cycle, and the pressure to become pregnant that is being exerted on them, demonstrating that the handmaids are both 'necessities' for the state, and shameful, unwanted outcasts at the same time (Roland 17-23; Rubenstein 116). When Offred first sees the red tulips, she remarks that they are "opening their cups, spilling out colour" (Atwood 18). The handmaids, too, are supposed to 'open their legs' to receive the semen, and, in further consequence, the children of the Commanders, just as flowers must be pollinated by bees. Offred also states that the tulips are "spilling out colour," which is symbolic for the menstrual blood that the handmaids 'spill out.' The protagonist is anxiously waiting to become pregnant at this point in the book, and every month, when her own red substance 'spills out,' she knows she has failed again, and is one step closer to being punished. Fittingly summarized by Karla M. Roland, "the indicator whether or not she [Offred] will be saved is a monthly appearance of red" (17).

At a later point in time in the novel, Offred comments on the flowers again, stating that "[t]he tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening [...]; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty" (Atwood 51). Again, this description can be transferred to still-not-pregnant Offred's situation, whose womb might be ready to conceive a child ("thrusting up") but is still "empty." When Offred's 'tenure' as a handmaid for Fred and Serena is slowly drawing to a close, her condition is again exemplified via the tulips, about which she remarks that they "have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth" (Atwood 157).

That the red tulips serve as a symbol for the fertile handmaids becomes even clearer when Offred comments on the relation between flowers and the barren Serena Joy: "She's [Serena Joy] in one of her best dresses, sky-blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you [...], you can't use them any more, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants" (Atwood 87). Also, the flowers in the garden are something for the wives to "order and maintain care for" (Atwood 18), just as they would care for the offspring the handmaids produce. In another scene, Serena is shown violently cutting off the seed pots of the red tulips, symbolizing the tension between her and Offred, and the urge to control the woman who engages in sexual activities with her husband (Roland 21; Rubenstein 120-21).

Atwood further establishes the connection between the red flowers and the red handmaids when Offred informs readers that "[t]he tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there" (Atwood 18). Just like the tulips, which appear mutilated ("cut") and are now supposed to "heal," the handmaids, too, have been stripped of their former lives and identities, and the society of Gilead tries to instruct women that they now can 'heal' from the burdens of their former lives and 'enjoy' their 'privileged' "position[s] of honor" (Atwood 19). While Aunt Lydia, the instructress whose words Offred remembers throughout the book, refers to America before Gilead as "a society dying [...] of too much choice" (Atwood 31), the handmaids, now, like the red tulips, are apparently 'free' and 'ready to bloom:' "Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (Atwood 30).

This pseudo-freedom is allotted to them through their color-coded clothes, and also exemplifies the hypocrisy and discrepancy within Gilead, again drawing on red color symbolism. "The white wings," which the handmaids have to wear along with their red robes, "are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood 14). As white commonly stands for purity and innocence, these wings are supposed to keep the handmaids from 'contamination' by other men's looks. They are solely their respective Commanders' possessions and must be 'invisible' to anyone else. This is particularly contradictory since the rest of their attire is red, and red is a very visible color that easily draws attention. However, it is also the traditional color of stop signs. Like the red traffic light signalizes that one has to stop their vehicle, the red robes of the handmaids are a warning sign to the citizens of Gilead that these women are 'property,' and must not be touched by anyone except their 'owners.' The dichotomy between the white purity-wings and the red attention-drawing robes can thus be read as a symbol of the hypocrisy inherent in Gileadean society (Allan 631; Cerrato 4-5, 14; Thompson 32).

Another example of the link between Gilead's hypocrisy concerning 'shameful' women and the color red is when Offred remembers people who once fabricated seductive clothes for women, now "down on their knees, repenting in public, conical paper hats like dunce hats on their hats, SHAME printed on them in red" (Atwood 238). Not only could the connection between red and shame not be made any clearer (and bear meticulous resemblance to the public marking of the protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*), but also, it is exactly such seductive clothes that the Commander gives to Offred when they

go to Jezebel's. Furthermore, he allows her to wear red lipstick on their 'date,' another signifier of female sensuality. This signalizes that the social exclusion of the handmaids is fully subject to the will of the Commanders—which does not always necessarily correspond to Gileadean 'ideals' according to which the handmaids should only be 'vessels' used for childbearing. Furthermore, it is evident that their association with the color red is a tightrope act as they can only be desirable when they are also sinful. Also, it is their desirability and sinfulness which define them and turn them into social outcasts.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that there is a direct link between the color red and the subject of female denunciation and shame in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though this color has acquired various connotations in different cultures across different points in time, the ties to menstruation and female sexuality, as well as the negative associations of red with shame, lust, and sin that slowly came to the fore in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, have been persistent and find their unequivocal expression in this dystopian story.

Since the fictional Republic of Gilead is a "puritanical state" (Rubenstein 119), organized by Christian fundamentalists and based on strict adherence to the Bible, it is only logical that the biblical imagery of hell, Satan, and the Whore of Babylon, which is evoked by the color red, is allotted to the handmaids, who, in contrast to the masculine, post-menopausal Aunts, the sterile household servants, and the sexless, 'pure' wives, are 'contaminated' through their sexual activities. Even though they are forced to perform these activities and rendered necessities by the oppressive Gileadean system, they are still confined to being 'sinful,' 'dirty,' and 'shameful' women, who are shunned by the rest of society.

I have also demonstrated that this 'caste-system-thinking,' which is so prominent in Gilead, and through which women are pigeonholed according to their 'functions,' is a phenomenon that also exists in 'real' societies—in the form of the sexist and confining Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this 'dystopian' ideology is simply being extrapolated and exaggerated to the utmost extremes (Rubenstein 119-20). The use of different colors, along with the concepts and emotions associated with them, render this particularly salient to readers. By using red for the outcast, denounced women, Atwood draws on already existing powerful connotations that come with this color and heightens the long-lasting association between female shame and red. In Offred's desperate position, she remarks that she "would like to be without shame," she "would like to be shameless" (Atwood 271). However, due to her inseparable ties to the color red and everything it stands for, this shamelessness is withheld from her throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Notes

[1] Connecting emotions to colors is further explored by the artist in the album's titular song: "Losing him was blue, like I'd never known, missing him was dark grey, all alone, forgetting him was like trying to know somebody you never met, but loving him was red. [...] moving on from him is impossible when I still see it all in my head, in burning red" (Swift 00:00:37-00:02:27).

[2] With regard to other works of fiction in which characters fall victim to ostracism, it is noteworthy that red seems to be reserved for female outcasts and their sexuality. The most famous example for this is probably Hester Prynne from the 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The protagonist is denounced as an adulteress, and thus has to wear the scarlet letter 'A' on her breast. Similarly, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher revolves around a young woman who is being harassed and ostracized based on rumors about her sexual life. The title of the book is often stylized as *Th1rteen R3easons Why*, whereby the color red is used for the "1" and the "3." In contrast to that, texts that tackle the denunciation and exclusion of male characters tend to associate them with the color black. In "The Lynching of Jube Benson" (1904) by Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, the titular character is being falsely accused and killed because of his black skin color. The short story "The Little Man in Black" (1807) by Washington Irving equally links its socially outcast protagonist to the color black.

[3] It is important to note that denunciation and exclusion in *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from texts such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, "The Little Man in Black," and "The Lynching of Jube Benson" in the sense that not an individual character is being excluded, but an entire societal group, in this case, the fertile, sexually enslaved handmaids.

[4] Even though a primary significance of red in the Bible is the red of blood (animal blood, Christ's blood), it is also established as the color of sin in the Old Testament, as it says in Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet [a dark shade of red], they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

[5] Petru explains that white and black "are the first in the evolution of basic colour terms," and "express what colour really is—our perception of light (white) or the absence of light (black)." Red, then, "is the first 'real' colour with a defined wavelength. It is the third term that emerges in language after white and black. In languages with only a few terms for colours, the term red includes many hues, which means that it includes all reds, oranges, mist yellows, browns, pinks and purples" (203).

[6] The Commanders, the powerful men of Gilead, are mentioned in combination with the color black throughout the novel, which is equally telling of their position, as this color stands for power, authority, prestige, and control (Cerrato 15-16).

[7] Indeed, red can also symbolize rebellion, which would be equally applicable to *The Handmaid's Tale*, since it is mainly those red-clothed women who are rising up against the oppressive system of Gilead (Cerrato 5).

[8] Originally, the Madonna-Whore-Complex was a term coined by Sigmund Freud to denote a psychological pathology that "inhibited men's ability to view the 'tender' and 'sensual' dimensions of women's sexuality as united, rather than opposing" (Bareket et al. 519-20). This means that endorsement of this dichotomy would hinder men from feeling love and desire for the same woman

Notes

at the same time. By now, however, the Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy is largely viewed "as a social ideology rather than individual pathology," unveiling "how culture and social structure shape men's beliefs about women," and helping to "maintain male dominance" (Bareket et al. 520-21). Focus is nowadays placed on "the sexist, hierarchy-enhancing motives behind this dichotomized perception" (Bareket et al. 527), which clearly find their expressions in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[9] The name of the brothel is also not coincidental but actually refers to a biblical persona famous for her sins and misconduct (Roland 10).

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Biography

Lisa Buchegger is currently a Ph.D. student in English and American Studies at the University of Graz. Her main research interests are (American) film studies, children's entertainment (e.g., animation, fairy tales), as well as gender and minority studies. Her master's thesis, which had the title "'The Fairest One of All: Appearance and Body Images in Disney's Feature Films'" is scheduled to come out in the form of a book in 2023.

The Obsessive Body:

David B. Feinberg's Attempts at Distance While Facing the AIDS Epidemic

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of the body in the production of New York author David B. Feinberg. Through an analysis of his fiction and non-fiction, we will see how the author continuously employed the theme of the body in order to deal with the traumatic experience of the AIDS epidemic. We will see how Feinberg's three books, *Eighty-sixed*, *Spontaneous Combustion*, and *Queer and Loathing* each represent a crucial phase in the author's relationship with the disease which also affected him, and ultimately killed him in 1994. By focusing on the theme of the body, we will see how Feinberg's work is employed both as a way to provoke readers and spark a reaction from the public, and to allow him to deal with the trauma of living as a gay man during the epidemic. Through the main theme of the body, the paper focuses on a few key concepts, such as the stigma attached to PWAs (people with AIDS), the employment of humor in the context of the tragic, the obscenity of human corpses displayed as symbols of protests, politically incorrect behavior, the subversion sparked by a sick person proactively reclaiming his own narrative. Throughout the article, we will see how the theme of cleanliness, in particular, is employed to negotiate with the paranoia caused by the epidemic, and how, in general, Feinberg's work holds a prominent place in the landscape of AIDS literature.

Keywords

Abjection; AIDS Literature; Body; David Feinberg; New York Literature; Trauma Literature.

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.3

> *I found myself performing some ancient ritual dance: the dance of the sugar-plum fairies? the mating ritual of the black-widow spider?*
>
> David B. Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion*

Since its explosion in 1981 in the United States, the AIDS epidemic has had a connection with the LGBTQ community. Due to the fact that the virus, particularly in the beginning, seemed to hit mostly gay men, an equivalence was quickly formed between gay men and the disease. In fact, in the early days of the epidemic, before the name AIDS was adopted, the medical community referred to this mysterious new illness as GRID—for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. This equivalence, with the addition of the fear and stigma which also rapidly came to be associated with AIDS, was at the root of much of the homophobia the gay community endured during the years of the epidemic. Queer bodies (in particular, again, the bodies of gay men) became the battleground upon which many of these tensions were fought. In several cases, gay activists reacted to this situation by exposing their bodies in order to show the reality of the disease and to unsettle the public. The display of their bodies on the part of PWAs (people with AIDS) was a way to reject the stigma and shame commonly associated with AIDS. Writers embraced a similar behavior in literature. Among these figures, author David B. Feinberg stands out for the way in which his own body is featured in his work as an attempt to deal with the disease. Throughout this analysis, we will see how Feinberg's employment of his body became a tool for him to come to terms with the death sentence that, at the time, came with an AIDS diagnosis, and what are the consequences in AIDS studies of his approach.

AIDS literature as a genre emerged in the Eighties. During this time, gay literature in general had started to gain a new prominence but was still viewed as a subgenre. While AIDS texts could be considered as an even smaller subgenre, they also became in some way a tool for gay literature to finally carve its place into the literary mainstream. AIDS literature expanded the scope of gay representation: what until then had mainly been a genre made up of coming-out novels, often populated by solitary gay characters, had evolved into the portrayal of a community, representing a landscape and stories that were invisible to the general public. This corpus extended over several literary genres, from fiction (novels but also many short stories) to poetry, drama, memoirs, and essays. Non-fiction, in particular, played an important role as many authors found fiction not to be straightforward enough to convey the gravity of the situation. In the late Nineties, after the discovery of protease inhibitors and the end of the emergency, AIDS literature mostly faded away.

Many of the authors who had written about AIDS had contracted the virus themselves and died (including Feinberg). Others either moved on to other topics, stopped writing, or moved AIDS to the deep background of their work.

In the landscape of AIDS literature, David B. Feinberg has a story like many others. At the same time, he is a figure unlike anyone else. A New York gay Jewish writer, Feinberg got diagnosed as HIV positive in the late Eighties and died of AIDS in 1994. In his all-too-short writing career, the epidemic was always at the center of his work, which is strongly autobiographical. In this capacity, he is not that different from many other gay writers, most of them also based in New York, who wrote about their experience with AIDS before succumbing to the disease themselves. Feinberg's voice, however, is unmatched in AIDS literature. His texts tell a story which, at that point, had already been recounted a few times over (his first novel, *Eighty-sixed*, was published in 1989, almost a decade into the epidemic), but do so in a way that had not been seen before in the landscape of AIDS texts. His work rapidly received critical acclaim, particularly within the gay readership: *Eighty-sixed* won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Fiction and was positively reviewed in the gay press and *The New York Times* alike. Feinberg's style distinguishes itself for "poignancy and frightening emotional resonance," while it "keeps the sarcasm going" (Texier 7, 9). His second novel, *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991), and the posthumously published non-fiction collection *Queer and Loathing* (1994) continued in this direction but became angrier and angrier as the epidemic progressed and Feinberg's health declined. In a field of autobiographical works (a crucial feature of AIDS writing in general), Feinberg's voice sounds particularly personal and provocative, and outrageously funny. The combination of these elements is the reason why his way of tackling the epidemic stands alone in AIDS literature.

Controversial Bodies

In the mid-nineties, poet and critic David Bergman argued that AIDS had been "the most radical consequence of the body for gay men in the last twenty years" (*Burning Library* XV). AIDS, Bergman wrote, had twofold consequences for gay men: it became "an excuse to turn against the body, no longer to elevate sensuous joys and erotic pleasures to the place they occupied in the Seventies and early Eighties," while also placing the body "in an even more intense spotlight. The body becomes central since its ravages demand no less of our attention" (*Burning Library* XV). Since the disease was largely affecting young gay men in their twenties, AIDS was also often 'visually' challenging, turning the bodies of young boys into old and sick ones in a matter of months. As aforementioned, apart from the reasons purely concerning health, AIDS was also rapidly associated with a stigma that became heavy with political

implications when queer bodies started to be portrayed in literature. The act of PWAs putting themselves on display challenged the status quo, reclaiming their otherness[1] both as gay people and as HIV-positive people. Queer bodies were, during this time, a lightning rod for any kind of homophobic prejudice. According to Emmanuel Nelson, AIDS

> has literally made the body of the gay male an object of massive public curiosity and of relentless cultural inquiry. [...] The body has emerged as a supertext, a territory over which a bewildering number of competing medical, political and cultural fictions seeks domination. Contemporary gay writers, then, have to reappropriate their bodies from the unprecedented ongoing textual abuse in order to give voice to the realities of their endangered lives. (2)

The centrality of the theme of the body during this time is therefore unavoidable in AIDS literature.

The representation of the body in AIDS texts carries different implications and fulfills different roles. The homophobic rhetoric which dominated the public discourse is usually contrasted in AIDS texts with the portrayal of behavior which would be socially regarded as obscene. This includes close portrayals of the queer body in different capacities. Especially when it comes to the outrageousness connected with the representation of the body, AIDS texts have to be considered in the light of Rabelaisian laughter.[2] The explicit description of bodily functions, both sexual and related to the disease, is a recurring theme in AIDS literature, and many authors, including Feinberg, employ a form of humor that is informed by this approach, provocatively putting the body at the center. The most common example when it comes to the portrayal of the body would be the list of symptoms, an essential tool that aimed to contrast the lack of information provided by the government. A few writers also decided to discuss the reality of having a sex life in the midst of an epidemic, with significant attention paid to the issue of safe sex, condoms, and the risks of anal intercourse. Many authors, however, included descriptions of the disease which did not have the goal of information but that of representation. Among these portrayals, obviously, there was the issue of the body dealing with the virus.

In Feinberg's work, the human body (specifically, his own) has always been a central element. During the clone years,[3] Feinberg reportedly paid a lot of attention to being fit and having muscles: "his hours at the gym had sculpted the skinny kid into the Gay Urban Clone" (Burkett 342). Like many of his peers, he worked out a lot: physical fitness was certainly not a rare concern at the time, particularly for gay men. However, during the years of the epidemic, the social significance of the body of gay men changed altogether and Feinberg gave a prominent role to this theme in his work, focusing on the impact of AIDS. The themes concerning the body are represented as multifaceted, from health to sex.

Later on, the theme of the body became indissolubly linked to his own diagnosis, and finally to his impending death. In one way or another, Feinberg filtered his anxieties about AIDS through the theme of his body, tracking the progression of his own illness.

Eighty-sixed: Sex and the Age of Anxiety

Part of the 'second generation' of gay authors writing about the epidemic, Feinberg always included AIDS in his work. Unlike older writers like Edmund White or Larry Kramer who had started to publish before the epidemic, AIDS always was the dominant theme in Feinberg's texts. This entails that, both in his novels and his non-fiction, Feinberg is always looking for a way to deal with AIDS. In this sense, his approach to the epidemic clearly follows the pace of his three books: *Eighty-sixed* is dominated by the obsessive fear of getting infected, *Spontaneous Combustion* deals with his positive diagnosis for HIV and, finally, *Queer and Loathing* expresses his fury at the idea that he knows that he is going to die.

As aforementioned, *Eighty-sixed*, Feinberg's first novel, is consumed by his anxieties about getting infected with HIV. Therefore, his relationship with his body is central in this book, and sex represents a big part of it. *Eighty-sixed* is divided into two parts: the first half, "Ancient History," is set in 1980 before the epidemic. The main character, Feinberg's alter ego B.J. Rosenthal, walks us through the pre-AIDS world of free sex and treatable STDs. Consequently, in the first half of the book Feinberg shows us what it was like when the results of the sexual liberation were still enjoyable. In the second half of the novel, "Learning How To Cry," set in 1986, we can observe the harsh shift in human interactions, particularly sexual interactions, because of the epidemic, as, in Feinberg's words, "everything besides AIDS gradually disappears" (Smalling). Here, B.J. finds himself taking part in the care of Bob, a former trick he had lost contact with. The novel is filled with Feinberg's frustrations about his sex life, and contains a few humorous passages about how having sex works during the epidemic.

The theme of sex is inextricably tied to gay novels about the AIDS epidemic. Sharon Mayes frames AIDS as "a modern plague; it struck young people in the prime of their lives, was always fatal, and was sexually transmitted. The connection between sex and death was never so visible to the consciousness of a society" (Mayes 84). This connection is explored by several AIDS writers, including Feinberg who gives it significant space, particularly in his early work. In the first part of *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. lives his sexuality freely and without regrets, cruising and going to the bathhouses. This part of the novel, which works in sharp contrast to the world described in the second, presents plenty of sex scenes, often described in voluptuous detail (Feinberg, *Eighty-*

sixed 18-23). In the second part of *Eighty-sixed*, we see B.J. obsessing over the risk of contamination and infection, particularly when it comes to sex. As aforementioned, the association of gay sex with a sexually transmitted disease worsened the stigma against gay people, and impacted how one thought of sex even within the gay community. In the AIDS age, Feinberg observes, "Erica Jong's zipless fuck had gone the way of the Edsel. The is no such thing as sex without angst anymore" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 318). Leo Bersani argued that, from a conservative point of view, the generation that had liberated gay sex was responsible for the fact that "the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal [...] of proud subjectivity is buried." This generation had now found itself in the middle of an epidemic which "has literalized [...] the certainty of biological death and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation" (Bersani 29). In this sense, the attribution of meaning to the epidemic (what Sontag so forcefully warned against in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*) reinforced the centuries-old association of sex with death: "Sex equals death. Libido equals Thanatos. They used to be flip sides of the coin, didn't they?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 19). Toward the end of *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. tries to have sex with a guy he picked up, and the voluptuousness of the first part of the novel is substituted by detailed descriptions of safe sex—without, however, getting to complete the act: in the midst of it a friend leaves a message on B.J.'s answering machine about Bob's death, thus reinforcing the connection between death and sex and the tension between life and death.

Even under the specter of AIDS, however, sex and desire are reclaimed. In the process of attributing moral implications to an infectious illness, the parallel between AIDS and venereal diseases from the 1800s, syphilis in particular, is strongly implied by themes like shame and promiscuity. Bersani argues that "the public discourse about homosexuals since the AIDS crisis began has a startling resemblance [...] to the representation of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century" (17), which marks the time of the outbreak of venereal diseases. A detailed discussion on gay sex in the age of AIDS can therefore be read as a reaction to a world that would have wanted to see gay people's sexuality disappear. This way of discussing sex in literature is particularly interesting in the late Eighties and early Nineties, because it can be seen as an explicit response to the Bush administration's stance on the 'innocent victims.' Feinberg, for example, angrily writes that "Ryan White was America's favorite innocent victim, which left me guilty, guilty, guilty. Verdict first, trial afterward, just like in *Alice in Wonderland*" (*Spontaneous Combustion* 189). The theme of sex is obviously complex to tackle in a literary production like this, but AIDS authors do not shy away from discussing it. Many AIDS texts want to stress the point that gay people needed to have a

sex life like everybody else, even in the midst of an epidemic. With Feinberg being both Jewish and gay, the influences of both cultures are present in his work, ranging from a rich repertoire of camp references to a dark humorous tone. This cultural background is particularly noticeable in his early work: the influence of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*[4] is mostly visible in the way he deals with sex. Like Roth, Feinberg maintains a bitter sense of humor on both sex and neurosis. For example, he ironically notes that those who are going to survive the epidemic are those who did not have sex, did not have a social life and therefore overturn the Darwinian argument: "I don't see any end to it. I can't tell you what it's doing to the community. Pretty soon there's going to be nothing left. Survival of the fittest. Shit. Survival of the celibate" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 264). The act of reclaiming the right to a sex life, however, does not exempt him from developing a defense mechanism against the dangers of the virus. In his case, this defense mechanism includes associating sex with an obsession with cleanliness.

Germs and Showers, Contamination and Obsession

Feinberg's tormented relationship with the theme of sex is channeled through an obsession with being clean. His fixation on the possibility of getting infected is expressed through descriptions and prescriptions to wash oneself compulsively and a fear of germs, especially in *Eighty-sixed*. The act of obsessively disinfecting himself is a narrative device to put distance between himself and the virus in the hope of escaping infection, rather than a judgement about sex, a position which would be closer to opinions held by other AIDS authors.[5] The meticulousness that in the first part of *Eighty-sixed* is reserved to the description of sex scenes is, in the second half of the novel, used to describe actions such as this: "I shampoo, I rinse, work in some conditioner, soap up my body, rinse out my hair, rinse off my body, check for swollen glands in the crotch, under the arms, at the neck. None today. I give myself a second cleaning with pHisoHex" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 192). Even if in the first section of *Eighty-sixed* there are a few instances (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 113) where B.J. discusses cleanliness regarding sex, he also makes fun of a trick who showers immediately after sex by calling him "my Lady Macbeth" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 37), thus not taking it too seriously. The second part of the novel, on the other hand, is where Feinberg's obsession with cleanliness really manifests itself, and B.J.'s torment starts.

The fact that the cause of the virus was unknown for a long time sparked a sense of paranoia which was particularly prominent in the Eighties. The AIDS epidemic, however, was not the only reason for this paranoia. The theme of contamination which is implied in the concept of plague was also present in the public discourse, for example, in reference to the tragedy of Chernobyl. Feinberg directly compares the landscape of the epidemic with

the nuclear disaster: "It's Chernobyl. I'm glowing because I just had chicken Kiev" (*Eighty-sixed* 205). In the context of AIDS, the idea of contamination is extended to the formulation of a "specific modality of homosexual pollution" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 132), which added onto the stigma formulated around the idea of gay people as general sources of contamination, especially for heterosexual men. In Feinberg's fiction the satirical tone pervades even the portrayal of his own paranoia:

> the People With AIDS Coalition has 'Hug a Person with AIDS.' I plunk down a dollar and confront my deepest fears. He has no visible lesions. He looks reasonably healthy. I give him a hug and am joined by the facilitator in a therapeutic bear-hug. After it is over, I thank them and wonder why. What's next? Rim a person with rheumatoid arthritis? Dry-hump a person in an iron lung? Damn it, I can't even stop thinking sarcastic comments. Maybe it's the only way I can cope. (*Eighty-sixed* 234)

The idea of pollution brings along fear and paranoia about the presence of contaminating particles. At one point, after hearing someone coughing next to him in a park, B.J. comes clean: "I see germs everywhere" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 154). Later on in the novel, as he hears his best friend Gordon cough on the phone, he treats the whole issue of his own obsession humorously:

> Gordon coughs and clears his throat. […] 'You've got a cold?' 'Don't worry, B.J., you won't get the germs over the phone.' 'Did I tell you last week during therapy Neil sneezed, and I tensed up like a cat—you know, the hair on the back of my arms stood on end. […] So he blows his nose and throws the tissue, ineffectually, missing the trash. […] he asks why it's bothering me, and I tell him I don't like germs.' (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 297)

It is worth noting, though, that Gordon ends up testing positive at the end of the novel—so Feinberg may have found a way to justify his paranoia after all.

Despite the fact that it is animated by real and justified anxiety, Feinberg's obsession is always conveyed through a humorous filter. The author both makes fun of himself and in general laughs at the incongruity of the situation: "across the street the Sperminator is playing at the World—an unintentional AIDS title: death by sperm" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 193). In *Eighty-sixed*, the more B.J. tends to Bob, the more he worries over the fact that he too may be HIV positive, but even this thought is treated ironically. His fixation on being infected is expressed in passages such as this, where after visiting Bob in the hospital he feels compelled to go to a gay bar and jokes about the possibility of being infected already: "I wonder what draws me so urgently to the Spike tonight. The criminal's compulsion to return to the scene of the crime? The microbe's urge to return to the site of infection?" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 199). In *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. talks to a friend who is

worried about night sweats, trying to comfort him but failing to reassure himself: "'there's no sense in getting paranoid,' I reply, eating my words as I speak them. Intellectually, I'm convinced. The only thing to fear is fear itself. Psychologically, I'm a basket case" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 215). The fear of 'having it,' the fear of people he loves having it, fills his thoughts every day and dominates the first book.

Throughout his work, both fiction and non-fiction, Feinberg employs a device in particular to deal with his neurosis: he compiles lists. In *Eighty-sixed*, chapters are alternated with brief non-fiction sections, usually consisting of lists. In Feinberg's poetics, lists provide the chance of humorously breaking down the reality of an issue, and therefore the ability to somehow deal with it. *Queer and Loathing*, his only non-fiction work, presents lists as one of its main stylistic devices: in it, the author himself admits that "I've always enjoyed making lists" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 61). In the first part of *Eighty-sixed*, lists are what describes in the most detail concerns and interactions of the clone years. For example, one of the first lists is "Miss Letitia Thing's Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior Concerning Tricks, One-Night (or Afternoon) Stands, and the Like, with a Special Appendix on Relationships," in which he prescribes the Dos and Don'ts of one-night stands, advice such as "Never defile a lover's bed. Be imaginative. Use the couch, the fireplace, the bearskin rug, the linoleum kitchen floor, the closet, the bathtub, the fire escape," or "Stay at least fifteen minutes after you come. If he swallows, you are obligated to give him a back rub" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 30). It is after AIDS enters the picture, though, that lists gain their prominence in Feinberg's work. The first non-fiction intermission in the second part of *Eighty-sixed* is "Some Symptoms," a long list where the several symptoms such as itching, blurred vision, sweating or hallucinations are mixed with "speaking in tongues" or "an inability to insert the correct protuberance into an appropriate orifice during the sexual act" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 162). From this moment on, lists gain a crucial role in Feinberg's work, either as political rants or prescriptions about living in the AIDS age. What lists can provide, in his work, is an attempt at maintaining control. A rigid pattern such as the bullet point allows Feinberg to 'dominate' such a complex, traumatic matter.

In *Eighty-sixed*, lists are especially used to discuss Feinberg's anxieties about sex and cleanliness humorously. In the list "Safe Sex in the Age of Anxiety," for example, the author prescribes to "cover your mouth with adhesive tape," and suggests that "Foreplay should commence in the shower. The water temperature should be at least 180 degrees Fahrenheit" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 223). It is easy to see how humor, in a case such as this, can have the intent of downplaying Feinberg's fears about AIDS and, at the same time, his own paranoia. The first item on the list "How to Stay Celibate in the Age

of Anxiety," on the other hand, is "Acquire unattractive personal-grooming habits," followed a few lines later by "Subscribe to the Centers for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 238). Once again, therefore, infection and cleanliness are, albeit humorously, linked.

Diagnosis and *Spontaneous Combustion*

In the second novel, *Spontaneous Combustion*, the epidemic has progressed and the situation is even direr than the one described in *Eighty-sixed*. In this book, B.J.'s obsession about sex is substituted with his obsession about abstinence. Feinberg mixes his fear of contagion with the portrayal of what is now the social scene of the New York gay community:

> Allan and I talked about sex because it was much more fun than actually doing it. Safe sex was the operative. I suppose if I were ever able to actually stretch and reach myself, I would sheathe myself in a condom to prevent the possibility of transmitting some heynous disease to myself. Who knows? Maybe my lips would be cracked, of there'd be a canker sore. I'm so paranoid I masturbate with a water-based nonoxynol-9 lubricant. One can't be too careful. (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 38)

This neurosis, albeit with an ironic tone, functions as further demonstration that gay men are human beings with legitimate needs even during an epidemic. The satirical tone connected to abstinence is perhaps best expressed in the chapter "Why My September Phone Bill Was in Three Digits" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 141). Here, Feinberg parodies conversations on phone-sex lines, incredibly popular at a time when no one goes out anymore. The gay social scene has changed immensely from the scenes at the baths portrayed in the first part of *Eighty-sixed*. Feinberg notes how new and old habits emerge to compensate for this forced lack of a sex life:

> In the age of anxiety gay men go to the gym five nights a week, just to keep out of trouble. On weekends it's home with the VCR, watching porno, 'Masterbates Theatre.' In between checkups and hospital visits there are Front Runners, the Central Park Ramblers, the Times Squares, the bowling league, Sundance, and a host of other gay athletic-groups. For the religious-minded there's Dignity, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, and the Metropolitan Community Church. There's an endless list of twelve-step programs that meet at the Gay Community Center; people take on alibis at Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA), ACOA A-Anon, ACOA Gay Men Incest Survivors, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, Sexual Compulsive Anonymous, and Sexually Abused Anonymous. The socially conscious volunteer at the Gay Men's Health Crisis, the American Foundation for AIDS Research, the AIDS Network, the American Run to End AIDS, and so on. Any way to sublimate desire; anything to avoid sex. (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 201)

If in *Eighty-sixed* B.J. was obsessed with getting infected, but the virus just affected

people around him like Bob or his friend Gordon (whose diagnosis closes the book), in *Spontaneous Combustion* B.J.'s anguish is aimed at himself. In this second novel, he is tortured on whether to take an HIV test. In the first part of the book B.J. obsesses over all the possible symptoms (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 18), and ultimately decides to get tested. Feinberg describes his state of anxiety in this situation:

> my anxiety level was high, and it was time to do something about it. I had reached a particular level of anxiety that corresponded to the resonant frequency of my brain; one more day in this state and it would explode. I needed to either elevate it to a frequency that only dogs hear or decrease it to a reasonable level so I could focus my anxiety on things like nuclear war, famine, torture in Third World countries, Beirut, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the West Bank, crack, the homeless, and my relationship with my mother. In short, it was time to take the Test. (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 69)

Once again, in the direst of situations there is room for a humorous take. Once he realizes he has gotten infected, B.J.'s obsession with cleanliness not only does not stop, but worsens as it is not isolated to sex anymore: "I sterilized my dishes by running them through the dishwasher three times before using them; I washed my fresh fruit with pHisoHex; I shaved with a new disposable razor every day; I made my bed once a week with seven sets of sheets, alternated with rubber ones, discarding three layers every morning" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 84). The connection between cleanliness and sex in the age of abstinence evolves into ironic reflections on masturbation: "I'm not particularly fond of any of my bodily fluids. I always carry a portable battery-operated liquid Dustbuster to instantly mop off those unsightly semen spills from the masturbatory bedsheets or the stomach of the occasional budoir visitor" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 95).

The Shift to Non-fiction in *Queer and Loathing*

As aforementioned, Feinberg's novels are heavily autobiographical. The progress of B.J.'s illness closely follows Feinberg's experience with AIDS, his own diagnosis and illness. In *Queer and Loathing*, the knowledge of his impending death prompted him to drop the filter of fiction (which was very thin to begin with) and directly address the reader. The role of neurosis and cleanliness evolve following the author's own diagnosis: the shift to non-fiction transforms the obsession with germs into a parody of straight people suffering from AIDS paranoia, i.e., of those who were freaked out by the possibility of proximity to someone infected. For them, Feinberg compiles yet another list on the "Etiquette for the HIV-Antibody-Positive" (*Queer and Loathing* 57-61), which includes advice such as to avoid bleeding in public, bring your own silverware and portable toilets when visiting squeamish relatives, and abstain from sweating at the gym. With the shift to non-fiction, Feinberg's

style becomes even more explicitly provocative. Examples of this difference can be found by confronting his own fiction and non-fiction. For instance, in *Spontaneous Combustion* B.J. plans to tell his mother about his diagnosis: "I remembered an old joke about coming out. A guy tells his mother that he has an inoperable malignant brain tumor and he has only six months to live. Then he tells her he was kidding, he was only gay. But somehow, I couldn't conjure up something worse to tell so that being HIV-positive would be a relief in comparison" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 149). Bitter humor and sarcasm are always present, but the prose is not as harsh as in *Queer and Loathing*, where he directly describes the effects of the disease with texts such as "Cocktails from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 109), in which he describes the reality of taking AZT, gives advice on "How to Visit Someone in the Hospital with a Terminal Disease" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 160) or, we will see further on, provides detailed descriptions of the physical impact of the virus on the body.

The diagnosis brought a harsh shift in Feinberg's writing. His style, already provocative to begin with, became even more aggressive, playing on surpassing the limit of what was considered acceptable. In particular, intentionally countering the kind of behavior society would tolerate from a sick person, or even more so from a queer person, became one of the main themes in *Queer and Loathing*. According to Susan Sontag[6], "with AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt [...] . Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed [...] as a member of a certain 'risk group', a community of pariahs," and "the sexual transmission of the illness [is] considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself" (24-26). As she argues in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, the concept of "illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness": since the time of Oedipus, plagues have been considered to be "collective calamities, and judgements on a community" (Sontag 45). This tendency clearly tries to link the epidemic to a sentiment of shame and guilt for gay people, burdening them with "the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness" (Butler, *Bodies* 23). The idea of AIDS being a judgement on the gay community was lethal, as the government justified its inaction with the argument that 'homosexual behavior' was really the cause to blame. When the virus and its mode of transmission were discovered, the fact that "it was characterized not as a viral disease, such as Hepatitis B, [...] but as a sexually transmitted disease, such as syphilis" (Gilman 247) reinforced the connection between illness and what was considered immoral behavior and, therefore, guilt and responsibility. Feinberg responds to this tendency in his style, that is, by being exceptionally explicit about his own experience. In particular, he rips that curtain that usually isolates those who suffer from a grave illness and details what the virus is doing to him. He is not passive, as most terminally

ill people are expected to be, on the contrary, he is intentionally disturbing. This subversive behavior is exacerbated by the fact that he carries it out humorously.

As he states himself in *Queer and Loathing*, "humor is also used as a distancing medium: You can't stare directly at the sun" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 87). The psychological necessity of humor is an explicitly declared need for him. In his book *Laughter in Hell*, in which he investigates the relationship between Jewish dark humor and the Holocaust, Steve Lipman argues that wit "produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity, but psychological necessity" (8). Similarly to Jewish Holocaust humorists, Feinberg also makes fun of the darkest of circumstances as an act of resilience. Reflecting on the process of mourning, he wonders: "I had heard that it takes two years to complete the healing process and fully recover from the death of a close friend. Yet everyone was dying. There was no time left to cope. Were the two-year sentences of grief run concurrently or consecutively? Was there time off for good behavior?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 151). Not even death, therefore, is off limits for him.

The Implications of Explicitly Discussing Sex

The tendency toward humor as a defense mechanism often assumed provocative forms, sometimes involving the subject of sex as a way to refuse to be shamed about it. In his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?", Leo Bersani argues that "gay men's 'obsession' with sex [...] should be celebrated [...]. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a mode of ascesis" (30). The connection between infection and sex is sometimes underlined in order to perturb. This is partly observable in passages such as the descriptions of the bathhouses in the first section of *Eighty-sixed*, but becomes more visible as Feinberg's disease progresses. An example of this is when, having to tell his mother that he has contracted the virus, B.J. finds that "the words were too thick to leave my mouth. I had cotton-mouth. Something was stuck in my throat. The residue of too many members?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 194). In his essay, Bersani argues that the mainstream stigma pits male homosexuality against macho masculinity because of the patriarchal assumption that "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (19). As a consequence, especially when it comes to sex, most AIDS texts are very explicit in the language they use: describing the dynamic of blowjobs in the age of AIDS, B.J. jokes that "irony of ironies, plus-signs can go down on negatives, but not viceversa" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 212). In the depiction of the effects of a sexually transmitted disease within a community that is already being shamed for its sexuality,

representation of sex[7] is crucial, and its display becomes a confrontational tool to face off homophobia. The portrayal of sex and dating in the AIDS age also includes passages on drug therapies. In *Spontaneous Combustion*, Feinberg articulates a reclaim of sexuality by describing his initiation to AZT or, as he calls it, "A Zillion Tricks [...] A glass of Perrier would have helped. [...] Enough had gone down my throat in the past with little or no coaxing" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 132-33). The author also describes how the therapy updated his cruising technique: "I'm taking A Zillion Tricks, [...] care to be a zillion and one?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 136). As abovementioned, representing queer sex in detail is politically significant in a society that generally portrays it as repulsive. Hence, with passages such as these, Feinberg challenges the stereotype of what constitutes acceptable behavior for a gay man, as he defends what shapes his own identity and claims its legitimacy in a confrontational way: "what does it prove if we can mimic straight behavior? Why should we try to justify ourselves according to the breeder standards?" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 243). This reclaim of gay men's 'otherness' and, in some cases, even of the gay stereotype seeks political incorrectness in order to fight for representation.

When it comes to AIDS representation, an important aspect that has to be considered is that, especially for what concerns the gay community, AIDS was primarily striking young men in their twenties. The contrast between the horrible physical effects of the virus and the previously fit and young bodies of PWAs makes for a remarkably powerful imagery, which could include AIDS literature in other powerful canonical narratives depicting death wiping out a young generation. In this perspective, Emmanuel Nelson characterizes AIDS literature as a "feverish elegy, written collectively [...] to a generation dying young" (Nelson 3). In Feinberg's case, however, the tone is not that of an elegy as much as it is a paean. One of the main ways in which he makes his texts confrontational, particularly as his own illness progresses, is to show its effects explicitly.

Showing the Illness

Several AIDS texts portray the body of PWAs in order to show what the virus was physically doing to people. Consequently, graphic descriptions of the appearance of PWAs, often in the advanced stages of the disease, recur in many books. In the symbolic portrayal of PWAs, no other element has had as much as significance as the Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions.[8] However, besides portraying the reality of the disease, the use of graphic details also becomes a harsh but effective way to denounce the situation gay people were in, particularly when it comes to stigma. The display of symptoms echoes Kristeva's argument about abjection, according to which "in the symptom, the abject permeates me, I

am the abject" (Kristeva 11). Thus, the depiction of the body of PWAs, to use the words of Larry Kramer, became a way to use the fact that you "scare the shit out of people" (Kramer 44). The idea of making people uncomfortable is a common device in AIDS writing, and we could argue that few employed it as effectively as Feinberg. In *Queer and Loathing*, in particular, several writings aim at showing the effects of AIDS in the harshest way possible, especially by, again, including lists such as "Bleeding Gums from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 95) or "Warts from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 140).

It could be argued that in his fiction Feinberg deals more with the emotional, collective toll of being a gay man during the AIDS epidemic than he does in his non-fiction. In *Queer and Loathing*, on the other hand, while the emotional angst is still prominent, the author focuses more closely on what AIDS was doing to his body. The employment of this device in AIDS literature generally had the aim of gay people gaining visibility in the public discourse by making themselves impossible to ignore. This act of reclaiming the stigma, unafraid of touching even the most uncomfortable or controversial aspects of the situation, becomes exponentially louder and more outrageous in Feinberg's work. The display of lesions and warts, for him, is aimed at deconstructing the romanticized, elegiac narrative that was being constructed around these young men dying. A symbol like the red ribbon to attract awareness, for example, in Feinberg's view is misleading: "There's something 'nice' about a red ribbon for AIDS awareness. There's nothing 'nice' about AIDS. Leave it to some design queens to transform a plague into a fashion statement" (*Queer and Loathing* 184). This quote also signals another important trait in Feinberg's writing: the more he approached death, the more furious he was with everybody—including other gay activists. According not only to his own writings, but also to the texts of his contemporaries such as John Weir and Sarah Schulman, Feinberg made life impossible for everyone around him by forcing them to witness every worst aspect of his terminal illness. Weir details in his novel, *What I Did Wrong*, how Feinberg had one of his last outings going to Macy's, wearing a fur coat and announcing he had AIDS every time he approached anyone, either at a counter or in an elevator, thus spreading fear and discomfort across the general public (Weir 179-81). Schulman, on the other hand, documents in her book *The Gentrification of the Mind* how Feinberg's attacks also included those close to him:

> I remember when David threw a "dying party" in his Chelsea condo. He invited his closest friends and had us standing around eating and drinking while we watched him, emaciated, lying on the living room couch, dying in front of us. Then he had diarrhea accidentally on the couch and ran screaming to the bathroom. Stan Leventhal was there, very sick. After David shit his pants, Stan left. That's when I realized the cruel nature of David's act. He wanted to force everyone else who

> had this in his future to stare it down right now. No denial. No mercy. (Schulman I.3)

By forcing everyone, on the page and in real life, to witness what was happening to his body Feinberg brings the prominence given to PWAs' bodies to a new level. On what may have been the last time he was seen in public, Feinberg went to an ACT UP meeting from his hospital room at St. Vincent's, an IV connected to his arm, to scream at his fellow activists that they were not doing enough to fight the epidemic because *he* was dying. His rant was documented by filmmaker James Wentzy, who included it in his film *Fight Back, Fight AIDS*.

'Death Is Obscene'

Similarly to many AIDS activists, Feinbeirg's protest journey was not interrupted by his death. As aforementioned, it was not uncommon for AIDS activists to put their own bodies on the line. Their activism did not stop when they died. From the late Eighties on, ACT UP started to organize performative protests, such as the famous die-in at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, or the throwing of PWAs' ashes over the fence onto the White House lawn. The most controversial of these activities was arguably what was called a 'political funeral,' in which an open casket with the corpse of a PWA was brought in front of government buildings. In *Queer and Loathing*, Feinberg writes about these actions in the essay "Political Funerals" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 254). Recounting the funeral of activist Tim Bailey, Feinberg writes about a stand-off with the police, who wouldn't allow them to carry the open casket, and finds himself acknowledging that

> In a way, the police are right.
> Death is unseemly.
> Death is obscene.
> Death is ugly. (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 262)

That, of course, was the point of events such as this: to display the obscenity or, to use Julia Kristeva's term, the 'abjection' of the AIDS-ridden body: "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). In these cases, it was not merely a dead body, but a young body devastated by disease, an illness so violent as to make it an unnatural spectacle. When it came to Feinberg's own funeral, though, we know from Weir's account that the author was not the center of a political funeral. He was, however, the protagonist of—once again—a tragically comic ceremony, where his naked body lay in a casket with melting ice, thus needing to have a bucket underneath to catch the drops (Weir 204). The aim of Feinberg was, one last time, to use his body to make things as uneasy as possible for everyone else, even in the event of his own death.

When analyzing Feinberg's work, at every stage, we have to recognize how the desecrating act of obsessing over the human body helped him to cope. The representation and, most importantly, reappropriation of his own body as a PWA is at the core of what moves him to display it as he did throughout his work, and—crucial to the success of his style—he did so humorously. In this sense, the act of merely reclaiming his existence through the frank, harsh portrayal of his experience ends up being one of the most subversive acts in AIDS writing. His "public assertion of 'queerness,'" to use the expression employed by Judith Butler, "enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy" (*Bodies* 21). His challenge to what was considered appropriate, or politically correct, is made out of the mere fact that he writes about his experience without frills or romanticization, employing the diseased body as a proactive entity, and in a funny way. Laughter, Kristeva acknowledges, is "a way of placing or displacing the abjection" (8). The overlap of fact and fiction in his work makes his writings all the more challenging, as there is no doubt over whether he is portraying something personal or not, and his willingness to openly make fun of his own tragic experience allows the employment of abjection to be even more powerful. Feinberg succeeds in the hazardous endeavor of transforming a terminal diagnosis into an act of empowerment.

We have seen how the theme of the body has a prominent role in Feinberg's work. The overlap between fact and fiction that we can find in his books allows us to consider his texts as part of the performative protests he took part in during the last few years of his life. By displaying his body and his experience in such an open manner, we can say that Feinberg carried out his own version of a political funeral on the page, a long, loud ceremony which he took active part in and that he crafted himself.

Notes

[1] This dynamic echoes Bakhtin's argument on the gaze of the outsider: "essential [...] is [...] the right to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation" (159-160).

[2]The concept of "Rabelaisian laughter not only destroys traditional connections and abolishes idealized strata; it also brings out the crude, unmediated connection between things that people otherwise seek to keep separate, in pharisaical error. [...] [The basic groups of Rabelaisian series are:] (1) series of the human body in its anatomical and physiological aspects; (2) human clothing series; (3) food series; (4) drink and drunkenness series; (5) sexual series (copulation); (6) death series; (7) defecation series. [...] This new picture of the world is polemically opposed to the medieval world, in whose idealogy the human body is perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife, where in real-life practice, there reigned a crude and dirty physical licentiousness" (Bakhtin 1981b, 170-71); the Rabelaisian laughter represents the "heroization of all the functions of the life of the body, of eating, drinking, defecating and sexual activity" (Bakhtin 192).

[3] In the Seventies, the term 'clone' referred to a specific archetype of gay man, direct product of the sexual revolution. Frances Fitzgerald describes their style as "short hair, clipped mustache, blue jeans, and bomber jacket" (62-63).

[4] Feinberg, in fact, stated in an interview that "I always thought of myself as 'the gay Philip Roth'" (Weinberg 47).

[5] The most prominent example for this phenomenon is playwright Larry Kramer: for more, cf. Bergman 127.

[6] Sontag had originally argued her theory about metaphors and illness in her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, which is about cancer. AIDS, though, pushed her to return to the subject because, as she herself put it, this is "a disease whose charge of stigmatization, whose capacity to create spoiled identity, is far greater" (Sontag 16), because of the moralistic implications.

[7] The theme of sex is present in different ways, often depicted with a humorous nuance.

[8] In the detailed depiction of the illness, the "disfigurement—argues Sontag—reflects underlying, ongoing changes, the dissolution of the person. [...] The marks on the face of a leper, a syphilitic, someone with AIDS are the signs of a progressive mutation, decomposition" (Sontag 41). KS lesions were developed as a topos calling on a deep cultural and literary tradition, first and foremost *The Scarlet Letter*: "I'm forced to wear my own scarlet letter in the form of these abominable purple blotches; a blazing visual condemnation for all the world to see so they can pass judgement on me and become part of my perpetual penance" (Burrell 153).

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Biography

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Blackness as Infectious:
Racialized Plagues and Anti-Plagues in Anglo-American Works of Science Fiction

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Abstract

With the outbreak of Covid-19, the virus has made increasingly visible a second pandemic spreading worldwide—that of racial discrimination—leading to higher mortality rates among people of color and unequal access to healthcare on racial grounds. In such times that many critics have called science fictional, the genre of science fiction can contribute to shedding light on the long-existing relation between fears of contagious diseases and notions of race and racism that predates Covid. Within numerous sf works and especially within what Priscilla Wald has called "outbreak narratives," a common and problematic narrative trope establishes a connection between infectious diseases and fears of racial contamination, whereby black people are perceived as the main culprits of contagion. Therefore, the paper aims, on the one hand, to examine how this trope has been employed in numerous anglophone science fictional films and novels, and, on the other, to consider how Ishmael Reed's Afrofuturist *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) manages to contrast this narrative by turning it on its head. In the novel, the infectious Jes Grew is seen not as a plague, but rather as an anti-plague, one that represents a tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans against the attempts of a white supremacist group to marginalize African American communities and to stop the spreading of the life-affirming virus. Jes Grew, then, stresses the fundamental role and power of collective movements to spread "virally" in order to fight for social and racial justice.

Keywords

Afrofuturism; Contagion; Ishmael Reed; Outbreak Narrative; Racial Justice; Science Fiction.

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.4

The outbreak of Covid-19 has made increasingly visible a second, connected pandemic of racial discrimination, with consequent higher mortality rates among people of color and unequal access to healthcare on racial grounds. In this context, pervasive phenomena of xenophobia and hate crimes could be witnessed all around the world and especially in the US, intensifying preexisting prejudices and stigmas against disadvantaged groups. These phenomena, engendered and enabled by systemic racism, have manifested themselves to the detriment of multiple marginalized communities, among them people of Latinx, African, and especially Asian descent. While the racialization of infectious diseases affects multiple social groups, this paper aims to shed light on phenomena of racism in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the analysis of prior recurrent ways of depicting black people in association with discourses on contagion that have firmly established themselves in the American imagination, with the acknowledgement, however, that many of the tropes that connect black communities to epidemics are germane to other ethnic and racial minorities as well. In fact, Covid-19 has been proven to disproportionately affect African American communities in the United States. According to Yang Li et al., African Americans are perceived as a high-risk group in the US, which engenders a tendency to perceive them as potential carriers and spreaders of viruses (28), thus reinforcing anti-black bias. This is clearly exemplified by the high number of racially motivated murders of multiple African Americans as a result of police brutality during the pandemic. The concomitance of intensified anti-black violence and Covid-19 appears as "indicative of a deeply entrenched relation to Blackness as a social contagion" (Douglass 257). At the same time, however, this manifestation of systemic violence has triggered in response numerous protests both on the streets and on social media and has led to the heightened resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement's advocacy for greater inclusivity, representation, and attention to the plight of marginalized black communities.

In this light, the paper aims to focus specifically on the relation between race, racism, and contagious diseases in representations of people of African descent in science fictional novels, stories, and film in order to highlight the recurrent associations between black people and infectiousness that predate and illuminate racist phenomena that have taken place during the Covid pandemic. To this end, the paper is divided into two sections. In the first one, I contextualize the trope that associates blackness with contagion within the framework of what Priscilla Wald defines as "outbreak narratives," providing examples of how this trope is articulated in various works of science fiction, including Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), alien invasion narratives, and zombie narratives mingling horror and science fictional conventions. At the same time, while such representations often reveal the privileged white position of many science fictional authors and directors, as well as the frequent practices of discrimination against the racial

other, many authors, especially those belonging to marginalized social groups, have employed the genre to reveal its history of racism and counter it. For this reason, the second section of the paper examines how Ishmael Reed's Afrofuturist work *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) constitutes an example of works that, similarly to the Black Lives Matter movement's response to anti-black violence, speak back to the racialization of epidemiological fears, managing to subvert the negative connections traced between contagiousness and blackness.

Indectious Blackness in Science Fictional Outbreak Narratives

The genre of science fiction appears as an especially useful vehicle through which to shed light on the relation between fears of contagious diseases and racial anxieties associated with black people that has been made more visible by the Covid pandemic. In fact, science fiction has a long history of reflecting upon fears of contamination in response to various epidemics through the ages. Furthermore, the genre has employed epidemiological threats as metaphors for multiple types of anxieties both in movies such as, for example, Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), and in novels such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). Science fiction also provides a ripe terrain for analyzing how traditional narrative patterns associated with fears of contagion have conditioned cultural perspectives and practices through the years. In particular, the genre can contribute to thinking through what critics have been increasingly calling science fictional times. In this context, the pandemic can be considered as a science fictional "novum," that is a phenomenon or relationship that departs and differs from the author's and the reader's reality (Suvin 64), introducing thus a novelty that leads to social, cultural, and economic transformations at various levels. For instance, Lance Morrow suggests that with a plague mentality the boundaries between real life and science fiction get blurred: "People begin acting like characters in the first reel of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. They peer intently at one another as if to detect the telltale change, the secret lesion, the sign that someone has crossed over, is not himself anymore, but one of them, alien and lethal" (92).

In fact, just as epidemics require humans to confront the otherness of viruses (Thomas 143), science fiction has also extensively dealt with a separate and yet surprisingly related kind of otherness. Despite an apparent lack of black representation in early science fiction, racial issues and blackness are often implicitly present as a narrative subtext through either racial coding or allegories (Nama 2). In particular, Ed Guerrero has noticed the representation of race, otherness, and nonwhiteness to be particularly abundant in fantasy, sci-fi, and

horror genres, a fact that he explains by pointing to, among other factors, the dependence of science fiction on notions of difference and otherness in the form of monsters and aliens to move the plot forward (56-57, qtd. in Nama 3). The connection between fears of contagious diseases and representations of blackness in the science fictional genre is often expressed through the "outbreak narrative," which Priscilla Wald has defined as "an evolving story of disease emergence" (2) appearing in diverse media—from journalistic accounts and epidemiological discourse to science fictional novels and movies. The outbreak narrative "follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (Wald 2), stressing at once the necessity and danger of human contact and exchange. Outbreak narratives, Wald suggests, "promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies" (3). In fact, in these narratives the fear of viruses is most often tied to that of the alien, the stranger, the other characterized in racial terms. As Donna Haraway has noted, this dynamic whereby the "colored" body of the racial other is conceived as the source of infections, pollution, and decadent emanations was already in place in colonizing contexts (223). Such mentality has endured throughout the years and persists still today as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has made more visible, producing an "us vs. them" kind of rhetoric. In this context, marginalized groups are considered infectious due to their presumed primitive conditions, uncleanliness, and amoral practices. However, as Wald remarks, this kind of association obfuscates issues connected to poverty, displacing them onto the danger of what are perceived as primitive practices (8). Thus, it contributes to justifying the stigmatization of multiple groups—from Jewish, Latinx, Asian, and African people to immigrants from various parts of the world—and to translating social differences into dangerously biological ones.

In this context, anxieties tied to contagion have intensified with the emergence of discourses on globalization. In fact, the increased exchange, commerce, and contact between different areas of the world have shrunk distances and have made geopolitical borders blurrier and more porous. As Dahlia Schweitzer suggests, while "the traditional understanding of contagion hinges on the dangers of close contact, underscoring a literal threat to bodily boundaries, [...] contagion can also be seen as a metaphoric threat for larger, national boundaries" (43). Not only are contagious diseases a threat to individual bodies, but they also threaten the body politic of Western nations. This perceived threat, then, invites biopolitical intervention on the part of governments to regulate and control both social behavior and borders, often with anti-immigrant policies, in order to fight against potential foreign microbial and racial threats of contamination. The concern invested in monitoring and protecting national borders is especially

evident in early films promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO). As Kirsten Ostherr suggests, the main preoccupation manifested in these films lies with "the boundaries of visibility" (1–2). The preoccupation about invisible viruses spreading among the population, she argues, is tied to other forms of invisibility linked with aspects of racial and gender identity. In order to track and control how both invisible forms of otherness spread across borders, they need to be made concrete and visible. The main strategy employed within the movies promoted by the WHO consists in associating movements across geopolitical borders with the viral breach of bodily boundaries, connecting invisible contagion with external physical, national, and ethnic markers signifying otherness. Emphasis is placed in such movies on how the mobility of people and viruses is facilitated by the development of modern technologies, which paradoxically are also presented as a potential solution to epidemiological threats. In particular, films such as *The Eternal Fight* (1948) promote a narrative suggesting that contagion spreads from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, conceived as sources of multiple diseases, to Western Europe and the United States, presented as vulnerable to foreign infections (Ostherr 19). This kind of narrative thus reinforces racist assumptions that associate marginalized people of the Global South with disease and infection without acknowledging the power dynamics that engender social and economic inequalities in those regions of the world.

Considering specifically how racialized contagion narratives in science fictional novels and films have represented black people, it is possible to find numerous examples of what can be labeled as a "blackness as infectious" trope (Lowe 96). Indeed, as Isiah Lavender III suggests, contagion as a metaphor responding to racial anxiety is often construed and discussed in terms of black/white relationships, while at the same time representing a "diversity of subjective black positions, experiences, and identities that have been politically, historically, socially, and culturally differentiated" (156). This kind of trope appears already in place in the eighteenth century, when blackness was often considered a disease.[1] It further developed throughout the nineteenth century in pseudoscientific racial discourses and can be found at the very foundations of the science fictional genre in Mary Shelley's *Last Man* (1826). Her work, considered to be one of the first examples of science fictional novels, depicts a global pandemic decimating the human population. Within the apocalyptic dimension of the novel, the spread of the plague seems to reflect heavily racialized power dynamics. In fact, one of the main characters, Lionel Verney, contracts the illness from a black man, who is viewed as a threatening spreader of the disease. Shelley depicts the encounter between Verney and the black infected victim by describing the character's reaction as one of horror mixed with impatience, which could ambiguously refer both to the danger of potential infection and to the physical contact with a racialized other:

> I threw open the door of the first room that presented itself. It was quite dark; but, as I step a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer, he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea, till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. (Shelley 265)

The black man appears here as an embodiment of the plague itself. The image of the infectious man and Verney's response to him seemingly reinforce racial ideologies and anxieties of the nineteenth-century colonial British context, especially considering how this is the only moment where a black presence is introduced within the plot. And yet, despite his fleeting presence in the novel, as Young-Ok An has noted, the infected man proves to be central to the plot, propelling it forward in the role of the "agent who brings the plague to the forefront" (596).

Fears of contagion are also often represented in science fiction through narratives about alien invasions. These types of stories appear as especially suitable metaphors for virus outbreaks considering how epidemiological discourses have often militarized the spread of diseases through bodies, presenting them as invasions on the part of invisible enemies breaching and penetrating national borders. Indeed, Laura Diehl argues that "[a]s the concept of a microbial parasite was extended to a race parasite, the language of bacteriology—bad blood, infection, invasion—converged with the language of national defense—border patrols, resistance, immunity" (85). While alien invasion narratives have been often read as bearing various allegorical meanings in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and political leanings (Wald 160), explorations of race in particular are often displaced onto racially coded aliens threatening to contaminate and corrupt vulnerable (white) human beings by insinuating themselves among them and gradually assimilating them, reflecting a fear of the crumbling of distinct identities and of racial contamination.[2]

This reading can be applied to multiple science fictional stories, novels, and movies. For instance, in Jake Finney's *Body Snatchers*, serialized in 1954 and adapted into multiple movies, the pod people seemingly function like viruses taking over control of human bodies. The same dynamic appears in John W. Campbell Jr.'s novella "Who Goes There" (1938), which has also inspired movie adaptations among which, most notoriously, *The Thing* by John Carpenter (1982). Both the movie and the novella appear to display a sense of anxiety concerning racial purity, portraying the alien form as a

contagious virus that attempts to survive by attaching itself to humans. Carpenter's movie, picking up on the novella's underlying racism, stresses this aspect even further by ending the film with the suggestion that 'the thing' inhabits the body of a black scientist passing as a human, thus presenting him as a dangerous, impure other, while also echoing white fears of black people passing as white. As Lavender suggests, Carpenter effectively represents the kind of "paranoid vision anchored by Campbell's novella where passing, blood contamination, and racial purity are convincingly twined together through contagion as a race metaphor" (138). In this context, *Outbreak* (1995), directed by Wolfgang Petersen, is another pandemic movie in the sci-fi realm that, while not presenting aliens as sources of disease, similarly associates the virus with what is characterized as a 'primitive' African village in Zaire with poor hygienic conditions. From Zaire, the virus spreads all the way to the US threatening the 'civilized' Western world. The film is based on Richard Preston's nonfiction work *The Hot Zone* (1994), which provides a narrative for the outbreak of Ebola from Africa to other areas of the world, presenting the continent as the vector of emerging infections (Wald 34). Indeed, as Dahlia Schweitzer suggests, "Ebola—arising from the depths of Africa to threaten the world—has become the perfect disease metaphor, complete with its not-so-latent racism" (26).

Just as in the case of Ebola, AIDS has also been frequently associated with black people, and specifically with Haitian communities, which have a long history of having epidemiological theories directed against them. The "blackness as infectious" trope takes a particular shape in the context of Caribbean history as it is generally found in association with practices tied to the African diasporic religion of Voodoo and with zombie narratives, which have played a large role in Haitian politics both in the context of the country's independence and in response to US external pressures. In fact, while zombies have been often taken to embody conformism and dehumanization in connection with the capitalist economy (Shaviro 282), the undead creatures originally tied to Haitian Voodoo beliefs also seem to respond to anxieties of contagion and infection. This appears especially true considering how the zombie's liminal status as at once dead and undead resembles and echoes that of viruses, which have also been conceived as entities that blur the lines between life and nonlife (Laurence 16). Furthermore, zombies are also tightly connected to fears of specifically racial contamination. As Gerry Canavan suggests, behind the zombie imaginary lies the "construction of a racial binary in which the (white) citizen-subject is opposed against nonwhite life, bare life, zombie life—that anti-life which is always inimically and hopelessly Other, which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed" (433). In fact, both zombies and Voodoo have been associated

with the political dynamics of Haiti and with the fear that black political empowerment might prove to be infectious. Such fear has appeared repeatedly in the Haitian context in connection to Voodoo and epidemiological fears. In particular, Barbara Browning argues that the eighteenth century had already witnessed fears about maroons poisoning plantation food and water supplies by contaminating them with a Voodoo powder (98). This narrative made a reappearance in the late twentieth century in relation to the AIDS outbreak, which has been often posited to have spread from Haiti through Voodoo medical practices (Schweitzer 158). Browning (99) argues that such notion has been particularly popularized by Wade Davis in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), which hypothesizes the recipes necessary within Voodoo practices for turning someone into a zombie and whose film adaptation translated the author's insights into racialized zombies infecting unwilling victims. Even an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, written by William R. Greenfield and titled "Night of the Living Dead," speculated that HIV might be spread through Voodoo rituals employing human blood (Luckhurst 181).

Fears associated with Voodoo practices have been dramatized in multiple zombie movies. Both *Black Moon* (1934) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), for instance, reflect anxieties of white women being corrupted and infected by dark Voodoo practices. Robin R. Means Coleman argues that both movies reveal fears of white people taking on "black" traits specifically through infection rather than through imitation (Means Coleman 55). These kinds of zombie narratives gradually evolved into the current form of mass zombie outbreaks mingling horror conventions with science fictional ones. In fact, Schweitzer argues that "the postapocalyptic outbreak narrative fuses the science fiction element of plausibility with the horrors of a world gone mad, combining the outbreak narrative's proclivity for viral infection with our fetish for postapocalyptic visions" (156). Vivian Sobchack has also addressed the uneasy blurred distinction between horror and science fiction in certain hybrid films that come to locate themselves in a "no-man's-land" (27), and among which Canavan also includes zombie movies (433). Even outside the Haitian context, narratives about zombies, typically resulting from infection rather than from deliberate creation, often reflect racial fears. For instance, in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) England is teeming with people who have turned into zombies due to the outbreak of a lab-created virus. In one specific scene of the movie, one of the main characters is shown a zombified black man who has been chained so as to see the full effect of the virus. Once freed, the black zombie infects his captors with his contaminated blood, reinforcing the association between POCs and the spreading of infection.

Turning the Trope on Its Head: Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*

Despite the frequency of the "blackness as infectious" trope, numerous are the authors who have employed science fictional elements to contrast this narrative and who have addressed it in a critical manner. Among them, African American author Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is an Afrofuturist work that manages to subvert and turn the racist discourse of contamination on its head. In fact, Jes Grew, a recursive, "psychic epidemic" (MJ 5) starting in the US and spreading across the world, is presented not as a plague, but rather as an "anti-plague" (MJ 6) that enlivens rather than kills the body. Furthermore, Jes Grew represents a symbolical tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans. Indeed, the virus appears to constitute a vehicle through which to spread black culture. Perceiving the anti-plague as a threat to the order of society and potentially as the "end of Civilization as We Know It" (MJ 5), a white supremacists group called the Wallflower Order desperately attempts to stop the life-affirming, dance-inducing, infectious virus in order to marginalize African American communities.

Jes Grew's roots are to be found in African culture, specifically ancient Egyptian rituals, arriving in the Americas with the first slaves. The virus is especially linked to African American traditions of music, dancing, and artistic expression, through which its main symptoms manifest themselves. In this light, Reed appears to play with the notion of what Browning defines as "infectious rhythms," which "all spread quickly, transnationally, accompanied by equally 'contagious' dances, often characterized as dangerous" (12). At the same time, however, the author subverts this notion by presenting the contagiousness of black culture as energizing, emancipatory, and liberating. In fact, in describing his symptoms, one of the Jes Grew carriers in the novel argues that "he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior. [. . .] He said he felt like 'deserting his master,' as the Kongo is 'prone to do.' He said he felt he could dance on a dime" (MJ 10). This statement stresses how Jes Grew infects people with a desire for freedom, while fomenting movements of cultural revolution.

In this perspective, it is no coincidence that the anti-plague is also tightly connected with Voodoo practices and beliefs derived from Haitian culture, which have particularly influenced the US coastal South, where part of the novel is set. In fact, the Jes Grew outbreak begins in New Orleans, which has been the destination of multiple migration movements from Haiti since the revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, culminating with Haiti's independence in 1804 (Hurston 318). These movements have also led Haitian Voodoo culture to emigrate as well, being changed and adapted to a new context as a consequence of its contact with US southern culture. In fact, the trick defined in the novel as "the Human Seed," consisting in lying underground for eight days, seems to echo the Haitian Voodoo practice of zombification, comprising a psychomedical practice involving live underground burial (Browning 25). These kinds of Voodoo

practices are defended and embraced by the main protagonist, Papa La Bass, a Neo-Hoodoo houngan—a priest of the Voodoo religion—who attempts to put a stop to the machinations of the Wallflower Order.

Neo-Hoodooism derives from Hoodoo, which Read defines as what "might be called Vodoun streamlined" (*Shrovetide* 10). Helen Lock suggests that Hoodoo constitutes the version of Voodoo developed in the southern United States, while Neo-Hoodoo is a term coined by Reed consisting in a recovery of Voodoo as translated into the context of literary aesthetics (69). If Voodoo has always been a syncretic religion, mingling Catholicism with aspects of various African religions, it became even more so when it reached US southern shores. Reed further traces the connection between Voodoo and New Orleans culture by suggesting the similarities between the former and the tradition of New Orleans's Mardi Gras, both of ancient origins, polytheistic, and involving drumming and dancing, ritual masking, and costuming (*Shrovetide* 11). It could be argued that Jes Grew itself, closely tied to Haitian religious and cultural beliefs, possesses the same carnivalesque nature that characterizes Mardi Gras. As Bakhtin contends, "[a]ll the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (11). Indeed, Jes Grew, by moving people to "deserting the master" and defying the hegemonic order, could be said to be endowed with a similar carnivalesque spirit that allows it to overturn established hierarchies and values. Furthermore, just as the carnival is "hostile to all that [is] immortalized and completed" (Bakhtin 10), the cyclical return of Jes Grew "has no end and no beginning" (*MJ* 204), representing the persistence of hope and of continual revolutionary energy. In this context, the temporal trajectory of Jes Grew defies that of traditional outbreak narratives, which generally end with the definitive containment of the virus. Further, not only does the virus unsettle the hegemonic Western myth of progress that conceives history as teleological and unidirectional, but it also questions the exclusive validity of Western medical science by presenting Papa La Bass's Voodoo and Neo-Hoodoo knowledge as valid and legitimate. Neo-Hoodooism, conceived by Reed as a literary mode (Schmitz 127), embraces the same features of improvisation, subversion, and spontaneity that characterize both Voodoo and Jes Grew.

The connection with Haitian religious practices is reinforced in the novel through one of its subplots, which, taking inspiration from historical events, addresses the US occupation of Haiti between 1915 to 1934. In the novel, the invasion is motivated by a hope of "allaying Jes Grew symptoms by attacking their miasmatic source" (*MJ* 64), thus suggesting a tight connection between the Haitian fearfully contagious revolutionary energy and Jes Grew. Furthermore, the novel also dramatizes the kind of reception that Haitian culture has often received through sensationalistic journalism:

> What was this about doughboy zombies? The tabs were becoming outrageous; as if the scandals of Hollywood weren't enough they were playing up this matter on Haiti. Recently 1 of the reporters had sneaked into a big house chamber and emerged with a picture of a woman undergoing execution—ghastly but fun. The picture showed a zombie Marine surrounded by men in white coats. (*MJ* 52)

By contrast, Reed attempts to reappropriate and complicate Haiti's representation, stressing how the country resists any attempts to conquer it, becoming a "world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom" (*MJ* 64) and political freedom as well. *Mumbo Jumbo* also dramatizes the efforts on the part of the US to silence information about what is called the "Holy War" (*MJ* 140) against Haiti: "You see this was to be a mystery war and I would imagine that after the Americans withdraw, it will be completely deleted from the American 'History Books'" (*MJ* 133). In this sense, as Nama suggests, "'[f]orgetting' is thus inextricably linked with 'disinfecting'— stamping out memories of black agency and revolution" (96), where Jes Grew works to spread African culture against cultural and historical amnesia, manifesting thus its revolutionary potential.

Furthermore, *Mumbo Jumbo* also highlights notions of corporeality and matter. In this context, "mattering" stands both for the relevance of the message that is delivered by the novel in terms of the significance of visibility, resistance, and resurgence of marginalized African American communities, as well as in terms of the process of making concrete, visible, and embodied the permeability of and interconnectedness among bodies through infection, both literally and metaphorically. Jes Grew can be considered in light of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, which points toward the porosity of bodies receptive to external matter. Jes Grew matters by making visible and concrete the centrality of African American culture, as well as making visible the symptoms of the invisible, immaterial anti-plague, which spreads through the bodies of both white and black people, crossing both corporeal as well as racial borders. The mattering of Jes Grew then is about interconnectedness, communication, affirmation of bodies and the ideas expressed through those bodies. Most of all, the anti-plague points toward a celebration of the overspilling of boundaries and of the creation of viral networks. In this sense, *Mumbo Jumbo* appropriates the tools of the outbreak narrative, which tracks and makes visible the movement of communicable diseases and their consequences (Wald 39), while reversing its latent racism. Just like Covid-19, Jes Grew exposes the interconnectedness that ties people together, as well as the hierarchical and unjust power dynamics that viruses make more visible. Indeed, while pandemics lead to loss, uncertainty, and anxiety, revealing issues of social and racial inequality, they can also give rise to instances of solidarity, alliance, and cooperation among peoples in response to crises. The word "contagion" itself derives from the Latin *contagio*, meaning to "touch

together." The term's etymology thus stresses how viruses reveal the dangers of contact as well as the necessity of coming together and forming shared bonds. In particular, one of its earliest usages, which appears still relevant when considering the spread of Jes Grew, is connected to the circulation of ideas and attitudes in terms of revolutionary ideas considered contagious and dangerous. As Wald argues, "[t]he circulation of disease and the circulation of ideas were material and experiential, even if not visible. Both displayed the power and danger of bodies in contact and demonstrated the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds" (12-13).

Jes Grew is spread in the novel through radio networks. Its diffusion through technological devices highlights the relevance of trespassing and transgressing boundaries through technological communication on the part of African Americans in order to fight off the efforts of the Wallflower Order to, in turn, use technology to halt Jes Grew. In fact, Hinckle Von Vampton, a member of the Wallflower Order, devises a plan to eradicate the epidemic involving an imaginary technology called the "Talking Android," which is supposed to infiltrate the black community and disrupt it from within, functioning as an "antibiotic":

> The 2nd Stage of the plan is to groom a Talking Android who will work within the Negro, who seems to be its classical host; to drive it out, categorize it analyze it expel it slay it, blot Jes Grew. A speaking scull they can use any way they want, a rapping antibiotic who will abort it from the American womb to which it clings like a stubborn fetus. In other words this Talking Android will be engaged to cut-it-up, break down this Germ, keep it from behind the counter. (*MJ* 17)

Not finding a black person willing to take on the role of the Talking Android, Von Vampton then has his accomplice Hubert "Safecracker" Gould impersonate it by wearing blackface. The figure of the android or the robot appears highly evocative in this context. In fact, it has historically been employed in racially coded ways, the term "robot" itself, invented by Karl Capek, originally being intended as a metaphor for slavery. As Lavender suggests, "with the image of a white person in blackface posing as an android, *Mumbo Jumbo* makes an unconventional connection between a traditional sf motif and African American iconography" (165). The concept of a racialized android as embodied by the Talking Android is used by Read to comment on and critique the way in which black people have often been conceived as mechanized tools to be used and exploited. As the author himself has once commented in an interview, "[e]verybody is making a fortune out of blackness [. . .] blackness as a technology, as a way of making money [. . .] Blacks, the creators, are the natural resources" (Zamir 1149).

However, in response to the Wallflower Order, Jes Grew equally employs technological means, appropriating them and reclaiming them,

in order to contrast the white supremacists' efforts to silence African American culture. The way the anti-plague spreads through radio networks is compared to "Booker T. Washington's Grapevine telegraph" (*MJ* 13). By tracing a connection between the way the virus moves and the antebellum communication systems mentioned by Washington in *Up from Slavery* (1901), Reed stresses the revolutionary potential of subversive networks. In this light, *Mumbo Jumbo* has been aptly considered an Afrofuturist text. Indeed, the work adheres to Mark Dery's definition of the genre as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology" (180). Science fiction itself, from which Reed borrows numerous features—elements of outbreak narrative, the figure of the Talking Android, and the novel's Afrofuturist connection with technology—is considered by the author as potentially "more revolutionary than any number of tracts, pamphlets, manifestoes of the political realm" (*MJ* 18). Science fiction then appears capable of revealing, addressing, and countering racial prejudices and assumptions embedded in and spread through popular narratives.

The power of collective action through technological media, exemplified by Ishmael Reed in his depiction of Jes Grew moving through radio networks, is clearly demonstrated in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak by the protests that have taken place in response to police brutality and to the killings of numerous black individuals prior to and during the 2020 pandemic. Indeed, while it should be noted that black people continue to be killed disproportionately at the hands of police officers, Black Lives Matter, the movement that includes a wide range of black liberation organizations, has played an important role in ushering changes in law enforcement policies and organization. Furthermore, it has contributed to drawing attention to unethical and racist police practices, as well as to the unjust racial dynamics and systemic racism that Covid has made more visible by affecting POC communities in larger measures. Indeed, Daniel S. Goldberg argues that "[e]pidemics illuminate stratifications, particularly among axes of power and social capital. Unsurprisingly, these demarcations often seem to intensify preexisting stigmas against marginalized and disadvantaged communities" (340).

In this context, social media have contributed to facilitating mobilization and organization of groups and protests, to educating the general public on racist police brutality, to giving representation and visibility to affected black communities, as well as to gathering funds for the cause through online donations. Especially in view of the restrictions enforced during the height of the pandemic, social media have served to cross physical limitations and connect people for a common purpose (Olson 4). For example, as Colin Klein et al. suggest, Twitter has played an especially crucial role in divulging information and in organizing

protests by virtue of the immediate and flexible mode of communication it facilitates. Furthermore, the images and video footage of acts of police brutality captured and shared through cellphones have also contributed to providing proof and testimony to the racist and violent behavior of police officers. While online activism must be complemented by more traditional expressions of dissent, technological means can constitute powerful instruments for addressing racial injustice. Rob Nixon, for instance, while recognizing that "the new media offer no panacea" (279), argues for the necessity of combining "activist staying power with new media agility" (277). Indeed, he suggests that "[i]n volume and velocity, the new media have made available testimony on a previously unimaginable scale" (278), a testimony that can fortify coalitions and collaborative effort to spread information about racial injustice and provide tools to address and counter it.

Conclusion

As the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted, epidemiological fears of the otherness represented by viruses often carry along with them fears about racial alterity that affect in grievous ways communities of POCs. Outbreak narratives reveal how the tendency to racialize contagious diseases has a long history that is clearly articulated in numerous science fictional works of literature and film. In view of the fact that narratives have the power to condition, shape, reinforce, legitimate, and, conversely, undermine cultural perspectives and practices, it appears of the utmost importance to tease out the racist implications that many works about contagion and infectious diseases bear. While the "blackness as infectious" trope still appears to circulate widely in contemporary society, works like *Mumbo Jumbo* effectively deconstruct the premises of this stereotypical and dangerous representation by appropriating traits of the outbreak narrative and subverting them. In particular, Ishmael Reed's work reveals how science fiction provides a powerful asset through which it is possible to counter the harmful tropes of the outbreak narrative that have been popularized through the ages, showcasing how the way we represent the world and the way we represent contagious diseases matters. Finally, through his representation of Jes Grew, Reed informs the reader of the power of revolutionary collective action, protests, and movements. Jes Grew urges the readers to respond to plagues, both literal ones such as that of Covid, and symbolic ones, such as that of racial discrimination, with anti-plagues, as in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement that spreads "virally" beyond political and geographical borders in order to fight for social and racial justice.

Notes

[1] Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), known as "The Father of American Medicine," conceived blackness as a form of disease, specifically arguing that black people's skin was a sign of leprosy.

[2] It should be noted, however, that some scholars have argued that the interpretative tradition of reading the alien as the racial other itself might be considered as potentially racist, reconfirming racial fears and generalizations about racial alterity. Andrew Butler, for instance, has argued in his discussion on the movie *District 9* that, while the intent might be to critique relations among members belonging to different races, the association between non-white communities and aliens might reinforce the very dynamics that it critically explores (104).

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Biography

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A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has been subject to controversial interpretations, often arousing hostility and disregard among both critics and readers. Particularly, the protagonist's suicide has been largely debated, being considered as the failure of Edna's awakening and of the attempt to claim her individuality. However, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that her death is not a failure, but rather a triumph: it is the only way Edna finds to freely express herself against any social constraint and break all the chains that limited her will. Starting from Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' first introduced in *Powers of Horror* (1982), Edna's ultimate gesture will be analyzed from a psychoanalytic point of view—through the reading of Freud's most significant writings, *The Ego and the Id* (1922), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In short, it will be argued that Edna's awakening, resulting from the traumatic confrontation with the evils of Nature, is what will actually lead her to suicide, interpreted as the liberation of the deepest drives of Edna's unconscious.

Keywords

The Awakening; Edna Pontellier; Psychoanalysis; Feminism; Suicide; Trauma; Abjection.

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.5

Introduction

Set in the familiar Creole Louisiana of the late nineteenth century, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) explores themes such as marriage and the subordination of women, the construction of one's own individuality, the analogy between inner feelings and natural landscapes, suicide, and especially the eternal conflict between social constraints and the need for individual freedom.

Although *The Awakening* made Chopin well known at the time of its publication, it also aroused negative criticism based on how Edna Pontellier showcased extreme sentimental and sexual freedom, and defied moral boundaries by killing herself. In fact, the novel was censured and completely forgotten for almost sixty years after its second edition in 1906.

Only after 1960 was literary interest in the novel renewed, leading to a third edition in 1964. In particular, the novel was brought to light by Feminist critics who saw Edna as a forerunner of some Feminist heroines. Thanks to the Feminist revival of *The Awakening*, "Chopin has been hailed as an early advocate of women's rights" (Wolff 449), and, among the most impressive Feminist studies, it is worth mentioning Emily Toth's works—in particular her biography—, in which she analyzes Kate Chopin's life and works from a multilayered perspective.

Notwithstanding this, Feminist criticism may present only a partial reading of the novel, mainly starting with and focusing on the assumption that "women's rights activists were in search of having the same rights with men as regards property and suffrage rights" (Taş 414). Moreover, what Feminists of all time also aspired to was to join an organized political and social movement, which does not occur in *The Awakening*. In other words, Edna's needs have hardly to do with the right to property or gender parity. As further explored in the second section of this paper, they rather remain the manifestation of an isolated, individual spirit.

A second wave of criticism was due, instead, to a re-emergence of studies about the American Renaissance and Transcendentalism (Bloom 2007), which has also been recently associated with English Romanticism and Gothic undertones (Băniceru 2019). Emersonian philosophy encouraged self-determination through non-conformity and exalted the privileged divine relationship between men and Nature, which is particularly evident in the novel in the recurrent analogy between Edna's inner feelings and the description of the sea. Besides, the attempts to escape from social constraints and all conventions that conceal diversity, as well as the nostalgic feelings towards childhood, are central themes in the novel and they constitute the engine that will put Edna's actions in motion.

However, the Emersonian exaltation of individuality and individualism may be in conflict with Edna's choice to kill herself, because she seems to have actually failed in affirming her individuality both in life and in death. Moreover, at the end of chapter XXV, Edna, alone in her house, is reading Emerson's works

until she falls asleep. This gesture seems to reflect an awareness that has emerged directly from Edna's need "to start anew upon a course of improving studies, now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked" (Chopin 71).

In other words, what Edna learns from Emerson is the idea that books are not as useful as direct experience and that she would rather go beyond, precisely "upon a course of improving studies" (Chopin 71), using her time to do what she liked; this is exactly what Edna is putting into practice, marking actually an overcoming of Trascendentalist assumptions. In fact, the protagonist's suicide, in both Feminist and later new-Transcendentalist criticism, appeared as the culmination of the failure of Edna's attempts[1] to claim her own individuality. Therefore, both approaches proved insufficient to further explore the implications of the ending of the novel from a convincing point of view.

As Bai puts it, "the analysis of Edna's death is of great significance to understand the ending of the novel," as well as the novel as a whole (Bai 846). And Mahon writes that "the focus of the novel is Edna, and what Edna learns, and what we learn about Edna as she does" (Mahon 228). In light of these considerations, more recent critical approaches have introduced psychoanalytic interpretations of Edna's suicide. Nevertheless, further investigation is still needed in this field because previous studies have shown the limits of interpretation as regards her ultimate gesture, mostly read as the failure of her psyche.

In short, *The Awakening* can actually be read as a *bildungsroman* (see Mainland), portraying the pursuit of an individual who is looking for her identity and for a way to claim it, notwithstanding all the difficulties she may encounter. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to re-interpret Edna's suicide through a psychoanalytic approach and to demonstrate that "Edna Pontellier's death is neither a punishment nor an escape, but a triumph" of an individual whose path culminates in the outburst of the overwhelming inner drives to which she eventually decides to abandon herself (Bai 846). In Chopin's words, "at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 13). What Edna is actually searching for is a way to answer her inner questions and to live accordingly.

However, Edna's suicide, although central to the analysis of the whole novel, is the final destination of a long, uphill path littered with many obstacles and challenges, along which Edna climbs and stumbles. For this reason, this article is divided into two parts: in light of what has been claimed above, it proves necessary to first analyse in depth, and from a Feminist point of view, Edna's path of individuation from the beginning of the story. In the second section, Edna's character and the reasons that will lead her to the point of her—somehow unexpected—triumphal death, are analysed and interpreted in light of Julia Kristeva's concept of the *abject*, as well as through the Freudian structural model

I. Edna Pontellier: Character Analysis

A green and yellow parrot...

The opening line of the novel, "[a] green and yellow parrot which hung in a cage outside the door [...]," introduces a significant image. As Clark highlights, "in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, avian vocabulary and imagery are used extensively, and these are an important tool for understanding women's oppression and possible liberation" (Clark 336). Bird imagery is not atypical in Feminist writings, and Chopin's novel exemplifies this, demonstrating why *The Awakening* is now considered one of the most powerful proto-Feminist novels of American literature.

The very first lines emphasize the importance of bird imagery with the image of a parrot that can only speak a few words in an unknown language and cannot communicate with the mockingbird in the cage in front of it. This already creates a strong analogy with Edna's own isolation and impossibility of communication. Edna's attempts to speak up for herself—and to be understood by the people around her—miserably fail and she eventually decides to stop trying. In her words, indeed, the reader apprehends that "no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence" (Chopin 29). Edna is *A Solitary Soul*, to quote the title that Chopin put on the first draft of her novel.

Apart from the parrot, in the novel there are at least three other instances of bird imagery thereof. Particularly eloquent is the white-bird with broken wings, which crosses the peaceful sky above when Edna drowns herself in the ocean. Hereby the author creates a beautiful and yet sad analogy between Edna and a mutilated bird, that is not strong enough to fly high and eventually falls into the abysm of the dark sea. From a Feminist point of view, Edna is not able to resist social constraints and the roles society imposes on women. She cannot understand "how to fight for and dedicate oneself to (and modify) any of those roles in the first place" (Ramos 154). Therefore she surrenders.

As will be extensively considered below, there has been a debate among critics about which episode of Edna's life should be associated with the titular *awakening*. Is it her first swim in the sea, or her first adultery? Is it perhaps her decision to move to another house, leaving her family?

What I will argue here is that both options are incorrect and that Edna will actually awaken only when she confronts the evils of Nature during Adèle's difficult childbirth, right before her mental breakdown. However, before getting there, it is worth analyzing the way Edna is first introduced in the novel and which episodes of her life actually determine her process of individuation and, eventually, her path towards her final decision.

Despite being the heroine, Edna is not the first character to be introduced in the novel. Before her arrival, the reader acknowledges that Mr. Pontellier, her

husband, is on the porch of Lebrun's cottage at Grand Isle, watching over his children, Raoul and Etiènne, playing together not too far away. Therefore, what readers know first about Edna is that she is a *wife* and a *mother*. She is not just 'Edna,' she is *Mrs. Pontellier*. Her commitment to her family is further highlighted when Edna, coming home from the beach, receives the wedding rings back from her husband.

Edna always had a good opinion of her husband. In the novel, "all declared that Mr Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better" (Chopin 7). Even when he deals with Edna's so-called mischievous attitude, Mr Pontellier never complains about her, but on the contrary he even encourages her artistic desires and gives her space when she decides to move out to the Pigeon-house alone. Notwithstanding, Mr. Pontellier remains a huge presence, a man in flesh and blood with a concrete appearance, with his own freedom to speak and move. Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, resembles a far-away, ghostly apparition. Unlike her husband, her body is deprived of materiality and becomes part of the landscape:

> The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. (Chopin 2)

What is also important to highlight about Edna's introduction in the novel, is her association with the image of the sea and its sublimity, as well as the presence of Robert Lebrun, who has been trying to teach her to swim. Sea imagery is a constant in Edna's path towards individuation. When she finally learns to swim, "Edna then starts her own flight to freedom little by little when her body is in contact with water, and she achieves an awareness of physical pleasures and bodily control through swimming" (Clark 337). To this respect, Chopin's words are quite eloquent:

> [A] feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin 27)

Therefore, in her description of Edna's first bath in the sea, Kate Chopin explicitly claims that Edna's knowledge of her soul and her body has actually always been there, as a latent knowledge ready to explode—when the external world becomes oppressive— and explode—willing to liberate itself from this oppression. However, she had never been aware of it, and she does not know yet how to name this feeling, or even how to bring it out. As readers of the novel, I may suggest that we are asked to become psychoanalysts in order to bring it all out.

The Model-Woman

There are two major female characters at Grand Isle alongside Edna: Madame Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. They represent models for Edna as they "implicitly demonstrate the options available to women of this time period, options Edna fails to exercise and sustain," namely, the *mother-woman* and the *artist-woman* (Ramos 148).

Although Adèle is Edna's best friend, they seem to have very little in common. For instance, while "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" and "would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone," Adèle, conversely, was like those women who "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 46). Unlike Adèle, Edna's priority is not—or at least is not only—taking care of her husband and children.

Mr. Pontellier, although ironically, often reproaches her "with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin 5), asking her and himself, "if it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 5). However, Madame Ratignolle's influence on Edna is strong, even though it eventually proves vain, and sometimes "the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language" (Chopin 5).

Edna realizes that she is not comfortable with the role that the society expects from her and, hence, she needs to do something to free herself. The first attempt to find a new model seems to be realized when she meets Mademoiselle Reisz and asks her to play a song at the piano:

> The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (Chopin 25)

From this moment on, Edna's "rite of passage" begins and she "undergoes a change of consciousness that is designated by the concept of the awakening in the title of the novel" (Anastasopoulou 19). In this process, Mademoiselle Reisz undoubtedly produces a significant change in Edna's consciousness, providing—as anticipated above—a counter-model, that of the *artist-woman*. In other words, "Mademoiselle Reisz is someone through whom Edna could develop relational autonomy and work out a counterstory that highlights the moral agency of her decision" (Smith and Wilhelm 111).

Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Reisz represents a challenge for Edna because the typical *artist-woman* is an outcast. Particularly, Reisz is described by Chopin as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone" (Chopin 24). Her rejection of and from society is shown

since "she entered the home with [Robert] during a lull in dance," showing her bad manners, as "she made an awkward, imperious little bow as she went in," and her complete lack of taste (Chopin 24).

In short, while Adèle Ratignolle embodies the role of the perfect mother and wife, and all her energies are addressed to her family in a satisfying way, Reisz is not completely accepted within the society, and she lives as an outsider. To this respect, we soon acknowledge that isolation is something that Edna cannot sustain.

Thanks to Mademoiselle Reisz's example, Edna decides to pursue her happiness through art.[2] She starts painting believing in the possibility to reach freedom through the exploration of her artistic ambitions. Moreover, she decides to do it on her own in a rented house that she starts referring to as the "Pigeon-House," following the suggestion of her maid, but which will eventually turn into Edna's cage.

Nonetheless, Mademoiselle Reisz is quite skeptical and tries to warn her when Edna seeks for other people's approval. Reisz, in fact, realizes early on that Edna is pursuing something impossible: the free expression of her individuality *within* the society of the time. Edna does not know yet that the path she has chosen is insidious and dark and the pianist tries to warn her several times: "be careful," she says, "the stairs and landings are dark; don't stumble" (Chopin 63). As Stone points out, it is almost a paradox the way in which Reisz dissuades her from her artistic expectations, while Adèle encourages and praises her talent (28-29). This is probably because Reisz knows the social implications and consequences of such a decision, whereas Adèle considers it as a hobby, another way to learn something to teach to her children someday.

At the end of the novel, Edna comes to refuse both models: she can neither live *inside* nor *outside* of society. In the first case, she would be unable to renounce her freedom, in the second case she could never stand "solitude, a condition necessary for liberation" (Treu 30). What becomes clear throughout the novel is that Edna is not just trying to reject her role as wife and mother and identify herself with the alternative model socially accepted at that time.

Moreover, what she does (and eventually fails to do) is take "drastic actions to elude the ideological system into which she is born" (Gray 54), trying to rewrite "her social narrative [...] creating a new narrative about herself and about the role women can choose to (or not to) adopt" (Cuffs 335). As Smith and Wilhelm have pointed out, "when she swims [...] Edna isolates herself" (110), although this "might help Edna to revise her self-conception temporarily, it prevents her from challenging dominant narratives about her actions, which she fails to realize" (111).

In order to explain the process that will eventually lead Edna towards her mental breakdown, it is important to underline that "her desire to live

outside of all socially constructed identities, cannot be realized, precisely because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be sustained" (Ramos 150). In short, she can neither be a mother-woman nor an artist-woman. What she wants to be is something else; namely, a *free-woman*. However, this model is impossible to embody, because Edna is incapable of renouncing her connection to society, her love for Robert, and the expression of her free sexuality (see Gray).

Sea Imagery

As anticipated above, another connection that is worth taking into consideration to better understand all the implications of Edna's collapse and subsequent suicide, regards the association of Edna's interiority with the power and vastness of the ocean. Sea imagery is used extensively in *The Awakening*. The sea is personified and becomes a central character of the story. In particular, Chopin writes:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 12)

To this respect, Abbasi has suggested an analogy between the sensuous and powerful touch of the sea and the masculine sexuality. Thus, he underlines that Edna's desire to freely express herself corresponds to the attempt to embody a masculine role.

However, "the maleness of Edna's notion of freedom" (Hildebrand 204) is not obvious since she is scared of the sublimity of the sea, as well as masculine domination. In point of fact, when Edna can finally swim on her own, she metaphorically understands what real freedom is like and, she later wonders "if any night on earth will ever be like this one" (28), because she knows that she cannot renounce that feeling anymore.

Therefore, the seductive force of the sea seems not to be the allegory of the masculine force. It is rather the projection of the infinite ways in which Edna can flee from that domination and express her individuality giving voice to and following her deepest impulses. At the same time, the sea still represents a seductive, sexual force. It comes to reflect the expression of Edna's own sexuality and of the possibilities to claim her own sexual freedom as a woman.

Nevertheless, if "the awakening is a sensuous one [...] it is important, however, not to accept this term as an exclusively or even primarily sexual one" (Wolff 458). The sea is the wilderness opposed to the civilization: the space where Edna can liberate her deepest urges—her unconscious. It becomes the allegory of her inner awakening not just as a woman, but as an individual trying to express herself in all her shades.

In chapter IX, Adèle Ratignolle asks Robert to ignore Edna, because his attitude could be misunderstood by a woman who is not like them. Edna is not Creole by birth—indeed, "Edna navigates two cultures" (Smith and Wilhelm 107) since she is from Kentucky. Within the Creole matriarchal society, Robert is still considered a *boy* and it is common that his "flirtations are not taken seriously" (Franklin 514). Moreover, Creole women, as portrayed in the book, are completely satisfied with their roles as wives and mothers. Adultery would never occur to them and their husbands would never be affected by jealousy.

On the other hand, Robert's answer to Adèle is upsetting: he will not leave Edna because he is in love with her, which is exactly why he knows that *she* would eventually hurt him. He already senses that Edna is looking for something that he cannot give her, because it does not only pertain to love or sex.

To this respect, another crucial moment occurs when Edna decides to spend time with Mr. Arobin, after confessing to Mademoiselle Reizs that she is actually in love with Robert. As Arobin complains that "I'm jealous of your thoughts tonight. They're making you a little kinder than usual; but some way I feel as if they were wandering, as if they were not here with me" (81), one might be led to believe that Edna's thoughts are directed towards Robert.

On the contrary, the reader learns that what she is concerned about is actually related to Mademoiselle Reisz's words earlier that morning:

> "Do you know Mademoiselle Reisz?" she asked irrelevantly. "[…] when I left her today […] she said the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings[3]. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to heart." […] "I've heard she's partially demented," said Arobin. "She seems to me wonderfully sane," Edna replied. (81)

At this stage of her process, Edna is already conscious of the fact that her individuality cannot be expressed solely through free love. Although sentimental liberation has allowed her to break the chains that would keep her tied to a prototypical social role, she senses that something else inside of her is still to be explored. Edna's sexual awakening has not strengthened her wings, meaning that her awakening, at this stage of her life, is not complete. She is still unable to fly by herself because she has not reached her total liberation yet.

When Kate Chopin writes: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 12), it becomes clear that associating Edna's awakening only to her feminine liberation, her sexuality, or her adulteries is rather reductive. On the contrary, Wolff has underlined that

> [t]he importance of Chopin's work does not lie in its anticipation of "the woman question" or of any other question; it derives from its ruthless fidelity to the disintegration of Edna's character. Edna, in turn, interests us not because she is "a woman," the implication being that her experience is principally important because it might stand for that of any other woman. Quite the contrary; she interests us because she is human because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us. (450)

In short, one must admit that the sea is not the reflection of the masculine force, nor is it only Edna's desire to express her sexuality freely. Rather, it has to do with the liberation of the unconscious of an individual. Thus, this is why psychoanalysis plays a significant role in the interpretation of the novel, without which Edna's actions cannot be fully understood.

In her article, Stone suggests an alternative, interesting interpretation of the connection between sea imagery and Edna's femininity. The sea is associated with two fundamental themes: birth and creativity. The word *creativity*—as explored above—represents Edna's artistic expression, the way she *creates* her life and acts freely. Subsequently, the sea stands for the infinite possibilities of an individual to express himself/herself and to be finally able to stand against social constraints. On the other hand, the concept of *birth*, or rather re-birth, associates the sea with the life-giving power of Nature, and consequently of women. Thus, it is the generation and re-generation of life. This is represented in a cathartic moment when Adèle Ratignolle delivers a child with some complications that put both the mother's and the child's life at risk. This crucial episode has a twofold implication. On the one hand, it traumatizes Edna and triggers her mental breakdown. On the other hand, it represents the point of departure for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel.

II. The Sea, the Awakening, and the Suicide: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Edna's Psychic Breakdown

Approaching the final chapters of the novel, Edna firmly believes that her awakening has already taken place. "I have got into a habit of expressing myself" (Chopin 103), she confesses. Moreover, when Robert admits that he is ignoring her because of her status as a married woman and that he would never possibly marry her, Edna is quite indignant: in her eyes, Robert suddenly reverts back to be a boy, and subsequently, she firmly claims her status as a free woman. Notwithstanding the incompleteness of her awakening, at this point of her process, she is actually aware of her potentialities as a human being and she has been trying to live accordingly. This notion is reflected in her words:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If

> he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." (106)

At some point, Robert definitively closes his relationship with Edna, hastily writing "I love you. Goodbye—because I love you" (110) on a piece of paper. Edna will read the message only after a few crucial hours during which she helps Adèle with her complicated childbirth. This traumatic event actually represents Edna's epiphany: "Edna's compulsion to be with Adèle at the moment of delivery is [...] a need to view individuation at its origin" (Wolff 470); the evilness of Nature manifests in Adèle's suffering and Edna is forced to confront it. Therefore, the illusory life she has been living breaks apart, causing "a significant psychic trauma" (Wolff 470).

This is when Edna's awakening definitively takes place: "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene's torture" (Chopin 108). In short, at this point of the novel all the reasons why Edna eventually decides to drown herself have been presented; in Treu's words, "Edna's witnessing of her friend's suffering during childbirth, the memory of her own similar suffering, along with the timing of Robert's decision to break with her, have all been cited as motivation for Edna's suicide" (28).

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva marks a turning point in Feminist psychoanalytic studies, thanks to her interpretation of what 'abjection' means. The term 'abjection' has a double connotation, since it represents at once the rejection of what disturbs and threatens the symbolic order, although remaining a part of it, and the human reaction against this perceived internal threat.

In other words, Adèle's childbirth represents a threat against Edna's current status. Moreover, it puts her in front of something that she perceives as improper and unclean. It resembles "[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [her] as radically separate, loathsome" (Kristeva 2). The fluids coming out of Adèle's body are repulsive, they defile her body and, as a result, woman's body in general. Not only do they remind Edna of her own childbirths and the act of procreation which women were mostly relegated to, but the scene also points back to the latent awareness that "abject and abjection are [Edna's] safeguards. The primers of [her] culture" (Kristeva 2). More specifically, "[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva 3). Adèle's body becomes in Edna's imagination the emblem of human decay, and in particular of female suffering.

Although Edna has lost her mother, she has not a concrete memory of her death. Adèle survives the childbirth, but the possibility of her death forces Edna to cope with and to revive her own mother's death. She is upset by the "wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay" (Kristeva 3). She associates Adèle's battered body with a corpse, or at least this is what she

sees in that crucial moment. The fact that Edna is not actually confronted with a corpse does not mean that the perceived threat of death is not true for her. This is what determines Edna's fall once and for all. In short, "[t]he corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance" (Kristeva 3). More specifically,

> [t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 4)

Furthermore, going back to the core of Edna's process of individuation, Kristeva's words are again enlightening: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). On the one hand, what Edna has been trying to reject is that part of her that she does not want to adapt to. In other words, the "[f]ear of the archaic mother"—a role embodied in the novel by the mother-woman model par excellence—"turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden to subduing" (Kristeva 77).

Edna rejects the role that society has imposed on her and that in some way has become part of what she is and the kind of role she has embodied for most of her life. On the other hand, Edna remains an in-between being, who is unable to fit in any of the categories accepted by the social order. To this respect, Kristeva's words may highlight and help interpret Edna's reaction in terms of what she acknowledges: the impossibility to live the life she has imagined for herself, the impossibility to be a free-woman. In short, she is not just an individual whose real identity is disturbed by the imposed social order. She is, actually, the abject, because she disturbs the existing social order, becoming what is being rejected.

This whole episode is a turning point in the novel. It is the crucial moment in which Edna finally awakens from her dream, from a life of illusions, only to find herself in a terrible nightmare. Witnessing the cruelty and hostility of Nature, she realizes that there is no place in the world for her and her aspirations. Under no circumstances can she actually express herself freely. The horror Edna's faces is generated from within the social order and has the power to unsettle it through its repulsive aspect. The individual tries to escape from this horror, giving birth, as in Edna's case, to self-hurting actions escalating into suicide. In short, with her death, Edna seems to give voice to Kristeva's aphorism, "[t]o each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (2).

A Freudian Interpretation

Expressing an interesting point of view, already proposed by Wolff in 1973 and cited above in the Introduction, Taş argues that "it is obvious that Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and her protagonist Edna Pontellier have hardly to do with the theory of Feminism and women's right. It is rather a novel that has been 'strongly misread'" (413).

The basis for such a statement lies in the assumption that, "[Feminists] were not in search of a complete freedom of their impulsive feelings" (Taş 413), or at least they were not primarily in search of it, as occurs, conversely, in Edna's case. As a matter of fact, one of Kate Chopin's best achievements has been her ability to lend a voice to the deepest forces living inside every human being's unconscious.

In particular, Chopin's—more or less explicit—psychoanalytic awareness is manifested through a lesser and yet significant character in the novel, Dr Mandelet, a friend of Mr Pontellier's, who is asked to help with Edna's recent 'strangeness' and who seems to embody the modern figure of the psychoanalyst:

> "The trouble is" sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost." [...] "It seems to me, my dear child," said the Doctor at parting, holding her hand, "you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask you for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear." (Chopin 109)

On the one hand, the doctor firmly believes that Edna's attitude is the consequence of a love affair, maybe of a love disappointment, and this unequivocally confirms the limits of his intervention. On the other hand, he represents a crucial character in the course of the story for two main reasons. As is illustrated in the passage above, he is willing to listen to Edna, and his help will be somewhat essential in bringing out her inner feelings and fears because he becomes Edna's friend and confidant. Besides, the doctor is the only one to understand that the trigger for Edna's collapse is actually the disillusion of Nature coming from its cruelty.

In the light of Freudian studies on the human psyche, two concepts are relevant in the reading of the novel's ending: the return to the *oceanic state* and the eternal conflict between the *Ego* and the *Id*. As regards the latter, in *The Ego and the Id* (1922), Freud outlined the structural model of the human psyche, distinguishing what is conscious from what is unconscious, and introducing, as is well known, the three parts of the human psyche, the *Ego*, the *Id*, and the *Super-Ego*. In *The Awakening*, the Id stands for Edna's personal (repressed) ambitions, while the Super-Ego is represented by the social constraints she tries to challenge,

in general, and by the rigid education imposed by her father, in particular. In between, Edna's *Ego* struggles to reconcile the two parts.

At the moment of her confrontation with the evils of Nature, manifested in Adèle's suffering, her Ego collapses: Edna is deprived of the ability to mediate between her inner drives and the outside world and this leads her towards a difficult—definitive—decision, which is her suicide, drowning herself at Grand Isle. She is forced to choose between living the life and role that society expects her to embody—and, in doing so, ignoring all her desires—or surrendering completely to her deepest (unconscious) drives. To some extent, Edna's suicide can be read as her response to the latter: she liberates the impulses of her Id and lets her deepest drives take control of her body and soul.

While the infant lives accordingly to what the Id suggests, with the emergence of the Super-Ego as the child grows up, the pleasure principle, driven by the impulse of the immediate satisfaction of one's desires, is replaced by the reality principle which aims at postponing the gratification of one's instincts according to the conditions imposed by the Super-Ego. The primordial drives are hence repressed deep down in one's soul, manifesting, as in Edna's case, through hallucinations and dreams, until the moment they explode and the individual cannot help but let them take control. In the act of Edna's suicide, indeed, the pleasure principle re-manifests overbearingly because she can no longer postpone the satisfaction of her desires and returns to a primordial, instinctual stage of life in which inner drives are not repressed by the Super-Ego.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting what Romain Rolland—in a letter to Freud in 1927—has defined as the 'oceanic feeling'—or 'oceanic state'—that feeling that Freud had previously described vaguely and which would be further explored in 1929 in his following essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Taylor and Fineman, in reference to *The Awakening*, have defined the Freudian oceanic feeling as "a period of early childhood when the infant, unaware of the boundaries between her own body, her mother's, and her environment, identifies erotically with all three" (35). The oceanic feeling is also connected with the period preceding the birth, when the child is safe in the maternal womb[4].

Taylor and Fineman have also pointed out that there is a very significant moment early in the novel that seems to exemplify the concept of 'oceanic state': Edna is thoughtfully looking at the horizon at Grand Isle[5], and something starts spinning fast in her mind. Edna "forget[s] the point of departure and find[s] [herself] removed to a secondary universe" (Kristeva 12). She experiences the "sublime," described in Kristeva's words as the object which "dissolves in the ruptures of a bottomless memory" (Kristeva 12).

> [T]he sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an

> impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination. (Kristeva 12)

Next to her, Adèle interrupts the flow of her thoughts and asks her what she is thinking about. Edna's hasty answer is "nothing" (Chopin 15). However, as the memory makes its own way in Edna's mind, "the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly" (Kristeva 12).

On second thought, Edna says, "let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can trace my thoughts" (15). What emerges, then, is a very suggestive association:

> The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seems as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. (Kristeva 15)

In this passage, Edna recalls an episode of her thoughtless childhood, in which the connection between the sea and the meadow, which appears meaningless to Edna, becomes crucial in the course of the story. In particular, the association has two important implications: not only does it create an analogy between Edna's present life and her childhood, but it underlines that, as a child, Edna's drives had not been repressed yet and—like every human being according to Freud—she was not yet overwhelmed by social constraints and all the implications derived from the emergence of the Super-Ego. Therefore, back then, she could live freely, expressing herself in all her shades.

Facing the cruelty of Nature, Edna's—until then repressed—inner forces explode, and she cannot help but let them out. At this point, Edna starts identifying the metaphorical sea of her untamable instincts with the actual waters of the Gulf. In short, Grand Isle and the ocean—as analyzed above—become the reflection of a timeless and spaceless interiority, an actual physical place where her drives can finally be released—in Foucauldian terms, a heterotopia (see note 5).

The sea also points to the idea of purification and the generation of life, which makes Edna think of her mother, but also of her own childbirths. Her mother's death marks a fundamental step in Edna's growth, which is the definitive repression of her Id, and the emergence of the Super-Ego, in the novel embodied by her father and the imposition of his rigid (patriarchal) education.

The forced separation from her mother causes a trauma which, as psychoanalytical studies show, can affect the normal psychic and sexual development of a child. Edna prematurely experiences the moment in which she is asked to separate herself from the mother in order to be something else,

the other. In Kristeva's words, she is actually forced to recognize the existing boundary between the mother and the other, and acknowledge "the (m)other."

Therefore,

> [a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence in which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (Kristeva 12)

In conclusion, it can be claimed that Edna's suicide appears like an—albeit extreme—attempt to return to the pre-birth oceanic state. In Chopin's words,

> [s]he felt some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. […] She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. (Chopin 112-13)

To this respect, Edna's act is not necessarily an act of regression, rather a catharsis—a moment of regeneration, of birth and creation (see Stone). Indeed, when Edna is confronted with the power of the sea for the last time, she is actually and symbolically naked, as a new-born creature.

Conclusions

With her return to the oceanic state, Edna is not going back to a life previous to her awakening. It is impossible for her to to return to the life she was forced to live, as she has become acquainted with a different kind of life which, although impossible to embody, is also impossible to renounce. The only way out is a reconciliation with the sea to recreate the sense of symbiosis with Nature that had been ruptured before.

In point of fact, through her personal decision, "she discovers that she has power over the sea. The change signals a significant psychic event: a reunion with those forces the sea symbolizes" (Taylor and Fineman 41). In the moment she confronts the hostility of the outside world, she cannot help but abandon herself "mechanically" (Chopin 112) to the only place where her Id can materialize[6]. In short, the suicide becomes the only means through which she can affirm her individuality.

Lahiri states that Edna is "not a vanquished rebel, who having failed desperately seeks refuge in death. She is an explorer of newer spaces and the proposer of a new alternative woman—the alternative of noncompliance, non-subjugation, and bold defiance" (70). Moreover, "in death, she symbolically enters

the realm of Nature as she wades into the sea" (Gray 72). Therefore, since Edna is aware of the double Nature of her soul—the one which conforms and the one which questions—in Freudian terms, she is tormented by the eternal fight between the Id and the Super-Ego. At the same time, there is no trace of the Ego in her—after her *awakening*—that is able to solve this internal conflict.

The absence, or rather the rupture of the Ego, transforms Edna into a patient—a human being affected and afflicted by an incurable illness. The dialectic conflict between the Id and the Super-Ego creates a tension that eventually leads her to liberating herself from those suffocating forces. It seems to Edna that there is only one way out of this tension: death. The death drive hunts her body and soul. In Edna's case it assumes the shape of suicide as all the anger and rage are turned towards herself.

However, Edna's act of self-destruction cannot be read as a regression or a degeneration of her illness. It is rather the ultimate possibility to free her real being. This is the reason why Edna's suicide is a *triumph*. It is the triumph of her Id—her unconscious—because these are the forces that she eventually abandons herself to as she drowns herself in the sea. It is her moment of re-generation—her catharsis.

Notes

[1] Edna's attempts can be summarized in three topical moments: the discovery of her artistic aspirations; her choice to leave her house and her family to go and live alone in the pigeon-house; her romantic affairs with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin. Besides, it is worth mentioning that a kind of emancipation may be evident as soon as she refuses to take care of the house and the children, and she stops attending Mr. Pontellier's dinners with the neighbors every Tuesday.

[2] It is interesting to highlight Edna's artistic aspiration as one of "[t]he various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—[which] make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellance called art" (Kristeva 17). In other words, Edna seeks in art a way to purify what she acknowledges to be the horror inside of her, in order to abject it and free herself from what has been defiled. This aspect of Edna's process of individuation, with all its psychoanalytic implications, will be widely discussed in the second section.

[3] As noted by Smith and Wilhelm, at the moment of Edna's suicide (see Bird Imagery, p. 5) "Chopin includes a wounded bird reeling on the water" to point back to this moment when "the metaphor Mademoiselle Reisz used earlier [conveys] Edna's lack of courage to defy social convention" (112). In Freudian terms, in the second section it will be demonstrated that Edna's Ego is not strong enough to mediate between her unconscious (the Id) and the social conventions (the Super-Ego).

[4] Kristeva's semiotic concept of Chora. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), the chora (a term borrowed from Plato's Timaeus) is introduced as an ambivalent concept; it represents on the one hand "the body of the not yet-subject and that of its [mother]," and at the same time "the beginning before 'the Beginning,' the mobile origin 'before' the imposition of 'the Word'" (Margaroni 79). In other words, it corresponds to the pre-lingual stage of development, when the individual is overwhelmed by a mix of feelings perceptions, and inner drives. It is also the stage in which the infant is closest to the mother and does not perceive the physical and psychic separation between them.

[5] Grand Isle from here on becomes the reflection of Edna's interiority, what can be defined as—in Foucauldian terms (1986)—heterotopia: a timeless inner space (the Id) that is identified with a physical real, and yet idealized space and with which it forms a unique lieu deprived of any kind of real or imaginary boundary.

[6] See heterotopia (n. 5).

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Biography

Fabiola Mazzola (MA, North-American Literature, magna cum laude, 2019) lives in Naples where she graduated with honors at the University of Naples "L'Orientale." Her undergraduate thesis focused on American author Kate Chopin, presenting a feminist and Freudian reading of suicide in her novel *The Awakening* (1899). In December 2019, her graduate thesis, supervised by Professor Donatella Izzo and Professor Vincenzo Bavaro, was entitled "Detecting Ethnicity, History, Psyche, and Gender in Lucha Corpi's *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992)" and offered a multi-layered approach to contemporary multicultural detective fiction in the United States, with a focus on its relation to the Chicano Movement also from a feminist point of view. The thesis was awarded with the national prize Lombardo-Gullì by the Italian Association of North-American Studies (AISNA) in September 2020, and an excerpt was published as an independent article in the n. 32/2021 of the RSA Journal. She is now working as a secondary school teacher of foreign languages.

‘The stock character of a middle-aged woman?’

Rediscovering *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* through Age and Gender Performance

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Abstract

In the context of age studies, Anne Basting (2001) refers to the performative quality of aging and Katharine Woodward (2006) claims that age can be performed in the same way as gender is also performed. Since Margaret Gullette (2004) refers to acting age both on the stage and in everyday life, the analysis of the character of the older actress acquires relevance in narratives that explicitly revolve around performing and aging. Deborah Jermyn (2012) contends that the older actress can be approached in different ways, as either an embodiment of compliance or as an agent of rebellion. This article aims to analyze the character of Karen Stone in Tennessee Williams’s novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) through a two-fold interpretation, taking into account social responses derived from the refusal to act one’s age, which can be demeaning, since the older actress is often scorned for not acting according to age standards, but also subversive, because she enacts a powerful resistance against the constructed discourses of age and gender.

Keywords

Age Performance; Aging Studies; Gender Studies; Mirrors; Performing Arts; Tennessee Williams.

DOI: 10.25364/27.3:2023.2.6

Introduction

Only three years after envisioning the character of Blanche Dubois in his renowned play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams published his novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950). Its female protagonist, Karen Stone—like the character of Blanche Dubois in the play—is also a middle-aged woman who sets off on a symbolic journey following her lifetime quest for desire. Both Karen Stone and Blanche Dubois are portrayed as aging female characters that either play the role of an actress or are endowed with prominent theatrical ways. Karen Stone, in particular, matches what Jodi Brooks calls "the figure of the aging actress undergoing a crisis as she confronts her demise as a public star" (32). Having been under the constant scrutiny of "the youthful structure of the look" for all her career, to use Kathleen Woodward's words ("Performing Age, Performing Gender" 162), and having been praised as an enthralling object of the male gaze in the golden years of her youth, as an older actress, Karen Stone feels compelled to face the threat of invisibility both on and off the stage, as a result of what Woodward has referred to as "the normative youth-old age system" ("Performing Age" 167), which has particularly prevailed in show business since its origins.

As the plot of the novel unfolds, Karen Stone realises that she can no longer be cast in the youthful roles that she used to play at the peak of her career as an actress. Envisioning herself as an older woman who begins to gain insight into her aging process and its effects on her life, after her husband suddenly passes away, Karen decides to indulge in a holiday in Italy, where she meets Paolo, an attractive young man, who is particularly fond of having affairs with wealthy older women and with whom Karen initiates a romantic relationship. As an inborn actress, Karen constantly negotiates how to present herself in society, at first complying with the cultural dictates of age and gender that request her to act her age—thus withdrawing from the stage and public life, and adjusting her looks accordingly—in a way that renders her prematurely aged. Subsequently, in the course of her relationship with a younger man and her active social life in Rome, Karen begins to subvert those culturally constructed dictates in terms of age and gender, acting younger than her age and liberating herself through an active sexual life, which necessarily renders her an age-and-gender offender according to prevailing ageist and sexist discourses.

The figure of the older actress—who feels doubly marked both as an aging woman and as an aged celebrity, according to Brooks (233)—began to recur in many American films in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, as was the case of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Margo Channing (Bette Davis) in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950), and even Baby Jane (Bette Davis) in Robert Aldrich's *What*

Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962), based on Henry Farrell's novel published two years before. Given her eminently performative tendencies that intersect with the discourses of gender and aging, the character of Karen Stone could also be identified as an epitome of the figure of the older actress, especially taking into consideration the prominent metanarrative quality of the novel and its self-referential dimension, which ratifies its author's insights into the semiotics of performance as a playwright and turns the novel into a narrative about performing both on and off the stage. This remarkable self-referential quality becomes even more noticeable in José Quintero's 1961 film adaptation of the original novel, featuring Vivien Leigh as Karen Stone, as well as Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 TV film remake, in which Helen Mirren plays the leading female role, and whose parts in these films somehow replicate their own personal experience as women actors.

Featuring an aging actress as the main character, Williams's novel delves into the performative quality of age and gender as displayed by self-referential remarks, such as Karen's description as a "stock character of a middle-aged woman" (19), which underlines the pervasive role that performance plays all through the narrative. Taking this premise into account, this article will examine the intersection of age and gender through the concept of performativity, focusing on how the character of Karen Stone ultimately exemplifies two different dimensions of age and gender, acting her age as well as acting against her age, hence complying with gender dictates as well as subverting them. Accordingly, this article aims to approach the character of Karen Stone through a two-fold interpretation of the portrayal of the older actress as both adaptive and subversive according to the discourses of age and gender performance.

Given the prevalent performative quality characterizing the novel, as an actress, Karen Stone displays a double dimension of performance, insofar as she apparently conforms to age and gender dictates, but she also challenges their assumed conventions. As Brooks further argues, the relevance of the character of the older actress lies in the fact that she resists being positioned as an embodiment of loss and refuses to play a socially sanctioned role as an aging woman, even though she is also compelled to surrender to prevailing gendered discourses of aging (234). Similarly, in the context of celebrity studies, Deborah Jermyn contends that there are ambivalent ways to interpret the character of the aging actress (3), mostly through compliant or dissident perspectives, focusing on her as an ostracised embodiment of the female abject or as a rebellious personification against the dictates of age-appropriateness. Besides, in terms of gender, Deborah Chambers claims that, through her performative tendencies, the figure of the older actress illustrates "the gendered body [that] draws attention to normative gender roles, at the

same time it disrupts, disfigures and parodies them" (167), thus revealing her inherently performative potential and ambivalent qualities.

In her intrinsic role as an older actress, Karen Stone recurrently engages in age and gender performance. In this respect, Anne Basting draws attention to the juncture between age and gender precisely on account of the "transformative quality of performance" (7) that characterizes both discourses. Drawing on Judith Butler's proposition claiming that gender identity is achieved through repeated practices, thus resulting in the subversion of gender—since it is revealed to be naturalized through repetition (191)—it is possible to argue, as Woodward admits, that "age is performed in the way we would say gender might self-consciously be performed" ("Performing Age" 165). Besides, Margaret Gullette contends that, given the performative quality of aging, one can act younger or older (163), regardless of one's chronological age. Consequently, the notion of performativity disrupts any dichotomy established between the materiality of the aging body and cultural assumptions of aging, in analogy with gender, since, as Butler further explains, we cannot address the body without resorting to discourse in the context of power relations (125), particularly within the framework of gender. In this article, it will thus be argued that, as a performer and as an older woman, the character of Karen Stone makes use of the performative quality of gender and aging to comply with their conventions, but also to take advantage of them for her own benefit.

Performing Gender: Masquerade, Gender Reversal, Androgyny

Having abandoned her career as a stage actress, Karen's initial compliance with—as well as ensuing subversion against—prevailing gender roles underlines her theatrical disposition also off the stage, hence disclosing the traditional connection established between women and masquerade based on the patriarchal conflation between femininity and artifice. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, woman's "great art is the lie, her supreme concern is appearance [arguing that] self-adornment [*das Sich-Putzen*] pertains to the eternal-womanly" (145). Drawing on the notion of womanliness as masquerade, Luce Irigaray suggests that the interrelationship between women and artifice arises as a result of "the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' [...] in spite of everything" (133). Accordingly, in the course of her relationship with Paolo, Karen's initial overstated displays of femininity can be interpreted as a form of subjection as well as of resistance against gender dictates. Based on Irigaray's ideas about womanliness as masquerade, Woodward claims that women may resort to youthfulness as a form of masquerade, which might not disclose "the fear of losing one's femininity, as we might expect, but rather the denial of a desire for masculinity"

("Youthfulness as Masquerade" 130), that is, the return of a repressed—but wished-for—masculinity that may come along with aging, which suggests a source of symbolic empowerment upon an increasingly self-perceived powerless condition.

Karen's performance of gender can thus, for the most part, be described as gender-adaptive, while inherently gender-offensive. In the course of her marriage, although her husband turns into her manager and chooses the roles that she is supposed to play on the stage, she actually adopts a more dominant and traditionally masculine part when she gets off the stage, in spite of her apparent devotion to him. As is described in the novel,

> [t]heir marriage, in its beginning, had come very close to disaster because of a sexual coldness, amounting to aversion, on her part, and a sexual awkwardness, amounting to impotence, on his. If one night, nearly twenty-five years ago, he had not broken down and wept on her breast like a baby, and in this way transferred his position from that of unsuccessful master to that of pathetic dependent, the marriage would have cracked up. (Williams 67)

Henceforth, the success of her marriage appears to be grounded in the actual reversal of traditional gender roles, since, behind her performed compliant and feminine manner, Karen manages to conceal her ambitious and cunning ways. In her youth, in spite of her apparent meekness and femininity, Karen is described as "a tomboy [...] outstanding in competitive games and sports" (82), and presently in Rome, when she meets her friend Meg Bishop, a woman journalist to whom she used to be very attached, Karen tries to avoid her presence, as she is reminded of a romantic episode that took place in the past and which "betrayed the possibility of a less innocent element" (15) along their friendship, thus disclosing a veiled homoerotic relationship.

It is only on some occasions that Karen exhibits her dormant masculine ways to her own advantage. In the course of her career as an actress, upon playing the role of Rosalind in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, she realises that the young actor playing the part of Orlando threatens to overshadow her on the stage and, in order to neutralise him, she decides to adopt an overtly masculine conduct. Aptly characterised as Rosalind, who in the play is disguised as shepherd Ganymede—that is, as a young man—Karen approaches the young actor in the dressing room as follows:

> [She] was to envelope him in a violent manner, which she instantly proceeded to do, in a manner that was more like a man's with a girl, and to which he submitted in a way that also suggested a reversal of gender—although finally, at the necessary moment in the embrace, she had changed to the woman's more natural pose of acceptance and he had managed to assume the (fairly-well-acted) role of the aggressor. [...] Thereafter she dominated him upon the stage. (69)

If, on the stage, Karen plays the role of Rosalind, that is, the part of a woman disguised as a man, off the stage, she reverses this role, as she displays her overt femininity, which switches momentarily to a masculine role to approach the young actor, and reverts back to a feminine submissive demeanour once her off-stage performance has come to an end. Accordingly, Karen performs gender in a way that, pretending to be feminine and compliant, actually conceals an ambitious and assertive personality—traditionally considered as eminently masculine according to gender standards—which she only displays at intervals, and which she will gradually reveal to a greater extent with the advent of her older years.

In Italy, following her quest for desire, and the advice of the Contessa—an Italian female pimp who introduces her to a series of young and attractive men—Karen initiates a relationship with Conte Paolo di Leo, who has made a reputation not only for his good looks but also for his continuous affairs with affluent older women. In spite of the initial liberating influence that her affair with Paolo exerts upon her, Karen cannot possibly leave behind the theatrical ways to which she has been accustomed, ultimately owing to the impossibility to stop performing gender, even when she is no longer acting on the stage. Karen envisions her relationship with young Paolo as another performance, thus admitting to herself that "there was practically nothing on her mind except Paolo, and yet she was more preoccupied than she had ever been during the most anxious period of preparing for the opening of a new play" (34). At the onset of their relationship, Karen displays her meek and docile ways, allowing Paolo to take the initiative and accepting to have dinner with him only at his request. Her performance of gender becomes more conspicuous as she turns into a frequent guest in social events and she indulges in the fantasy of being back in the spotlight, hence displaying her performative tendencies and her continuous turn for acting, as if envisioning Rome as her new stage, even if it is suggested that she may not only be deceiving others as an actress, but she may also be indulging in self-deceit. As is described,

> she still carried herself on the street as though she were making an entrance upon the stage. Imposing she was and still handsome, but only a naïve boy who had had comparatively little contact with the great world would allow this façade to deceive him. (41)

In the course of her relationship with young Paolo, Karen gradually leaves behind her most overtly docile and feminine ways, and becomes more possessive, trying to exert tighter control over Paolo and turning him into a man literally dependent on her. In resemblance with the affair that she had with a young actor while she was performing the role of Rosalind, in her relationship with young Paolo, Karen also indulges in an eventual reversal of gender roles. Paolo is physically

characterized as having feminine traits and his conceited ways often lead him to look at himself in the mirror, even displacing Karen if she happens to be in his way, while he also consents to being invited to dinner and accepts all the clothes and jewels that Karen buys for him. Consequently, even if tacitly, in their relationship, it is Karen who mostly leads the way, as she becomes deeply aware of the assignation of roles that is established, confessing to Paolo that, "you are very young […] and very foolish and very beautiful […] I am not so very young any more and not so beautiful, but beginning to be very wise" (53). In order to balance what she perceives as a reversal of gender roles in her relationship with Paolo, Karen tries to make continuous displays of overt femininity, thus exaggerating her feminine traits, which she associates with youthfulness, as a result of having been raised through patriarchal dictates of age and gender. Nonetheless, her concern about performing gender and holding on to "a masquerade of youthfulness," to use Woodward's words ("Youthfulness" 121), instead of concealing her aging traits, actually renders them more visible. As is portrayed in the novel,

> [a] number of times lately Mrs. Stone had gone out on the street in make-up applied almost as artfully as that she had worn on the stage, but Roman sunlight was not in sympathy with the deceit, and she was aware of receiving glances that were not merely critical but sometimes mocking. (92)

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's aesthetic notion of the carnivalesque, Woodward claims that the concept of masquerade in relation to the aging body is mainly considered a denial of age and a form of self-representation ("Youthfulness" 121). Karen's concern to overstate her feminine traits through profuse make-up ultimately meets an unexpected end, as her appearance somehow acquires an androgynous look, which, symbolically, betrays the impossibility to repress her inherent dominant role, and also complies with Woodward's thesis about the return of a wished-for masculinity in the course of aging, which symbolically suggests Karen's propensity to display the masculine dominant role that she had been taught to repress when she was younger.

The Change: Menopause, Desire, the Spectre of Corruption

After disguising herself behind the artifice of femininity and playing the role of a meek wife, it is precisely in this period, having abandoned the stage, that Karen becomes aware of the fact that, although she has played a great number of roles all through her life, she has never quite played herself. This symbolic moment of epiphany appears to take place with the advent of her climacteric, which is described as having a significantly positive effect on Karen's life. As is portrayed in the novel, "now that her [Karen's] body was rising out of the tangled woods of the climacteric, she felt a great resurgence of physical well-being—she was continually active without ever becoming quite tired" (90). In

addition, the beginning of her menopause involves a significant turning point of personal awakening through which she gains a deeper awareness of her own body, since, as depicted in the novel,

> Mrs. Stone could not deny to herself what she felt in her body, now, for the first time, under the moon of pause which should have given immunity to such feeling but seemed, instead, to have surrendered her to it. She felt incontinent longings, and while they repelled her, they gave her a sharply immediate sense of being. [...] What she felt, now, was desire without the old, implicit distraction of danger. Nothing could happen now, but the desire and its possible gratification. (51-52)

It is thus at this stage—having relinquished her former life as a public figure—that Karen feels released to give vent to the sort of desire that she had felt obliged to repress. This relentless process of awakening through the body that Karen experiences at this significant moment of her life appears to illustrate Germaine Greer's thoughts on the climacteric, which she reinterprets as a rite of passage involving "the restoration of a woman to herself" (53). According to Greer, the menopause symbolically marks women's withdrawal from the social context, but also implies not having to live mostly through responses to the needs of those in the workplace or the household (40), while, as opposed to other phases in women's lives, since the climacteric has not generally been acknowledged as a rite of passage, it concerns only the individual woman, who can envision it as a moment of reflection and introspection.

As Greer further contends, in order to mark this symbolic turning point in life, women may choose to alter their external appearance to indicate an internal alteration (37), for instance, opting to change their hairstyle. Precisely, in Williams's novel, soon after arriving in Rome, Karen's haircut can be described as discreet and ordinary, whereas, as soon as she starts dating young Paolo, she decides to change her looks completely, having her hair dyed red and wearing profuse make-up. Karen's altered appearance also becomes perceptible owing to the sharp change in her taste for clothes. As Julia Twigg claims in her seminal study about clothing and aging, the clothes that aging people tend to wear can be either described as involving neutral colours and avoiding showy styles—thus being considered age-appropriate (60)—or, in contrast, these clothes can be bright and eye-catching and, accordingly, may be regarded as age-inappropriate, but indicative of freedom and liberation of past duties and demands. In Rome, Karen displays these two styles of clothing, exchanging the plain suits that she wears soon after her arrival for the gaudy and colourful outfits that she often exhibits during her evenings out with Paolo. The noticeable change in her appearance necessarily marks an internal alteration at this stage in her life, which also has an effect on the ways she begins to alter her performance of age and gender. Karen's interpretation of this turning point in her life complies with Greer's ideas about

the menopause being liberating and "a change back into the self" (55). Besides, if Greer describes the climacteric as redemptive because women no longer feel a tool of their "sexual and reproductive destiny" (55), Karen regards this phase in her life as liberating precisely because it is at this time that she can give free rein to her sexual inhibitions, after a lifetime of repressing her desire in the course of her marriage. Furthermore, Karen's liberation seems to comply with Greer's precepts about the fact that women going through the climacteric are not afraid of losing their femininity but rather of losing their femaleness (52), which Karen begins to embrace completely.

Nonetheless, given the cultural and social constraints also prevailing in the Roman society, Karen inevitably succumbs to what Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) perceives as women's double bind that urges them to 'become women,' thus conforming to cultural prejudices about age and gender. At the beginning of this new life stage, Karen admits having selected Rome as her permanent abode, precisely owing to the fact that she perceived it as "the most comfortable place to lead that kind of existence, perhaps because so much of it seemed to exist in the past" (37), which underscores Karen's nostalgia for the loss of her youth, which she tries to retain through her initial displays of femininity, but also foretells her aging process as an older woman. Having grown used to becoming the object of the male gaze, she now indulges in turning into the subject of the gaze. From the antique palazzo with a nice view of the Roman streets and of the Roman young men walking along them, when she looks down to the street from the terrace, Karen is often portrayed as a predatory bird, as "her frightened and ageing face had the look of an embattled hawk peering from the edge of a cliff in a storm" (15), as if she were going to chase down her preys among the young Italians walking along the streets. Karen's liberated and uninhibited ways cause a stir in the Roman society and are constantly censured, even by Paolo himself. Passing judgment on Karen on account of her wealth and her influence, Paolo exclaims that "you rich American ladies are the new conquerors of Rome—at least you *think* you are" (56), being well aware of how Karen often leads the way in the course of their relationship, and how, owing to her affluence, she turns Paolo into a young man economically dependent on her, thus highlighting a power imbalance between them, which also adds to the noticeable age difference separating both partners.

The pervasive dictates of age and gender acquire a spectral presence when, in the course of her surrender to rough desire at the advent of her older years, Karen begins to notice a young stranger, either from the terrace of her palazzo or along the streets of Rome—with a scruffy appearance but tremendously captivating—who pursues and haunts her wherever she goes, as an allegorical personification of the corruption that she feels her life is drifting towards. As is described,

> [h]is beauty was notable even in a province where the lack of it is more exceptional in a young man. It was the sort of beauty that is celebrated by the heroic male sculptors in the fountains of Rome. Two things disguised it a little, the dreadful poverty of his clothes and his stealth of manner. The only decent garment he wore was a black overcoat which was too small for his body. Its collar exposed a triangle of bare ivory flesh; no evidence of a shirt. [...] And yet he had an air of alertness. The tension of his figure suggested that he was continually upon the verge of raising his voice or an arm in some kind of urgent call or salutation. (10)

Karen feels both attraction and repulsion towards this young man—as a symbolic reflection of her own desire and corruption—in analogy with Williams's character of Blanche Dubois, who hears the whistling noise of a streetcar named desire but cannot quite say whether it represents the fulfilment of her longings or it actually foretells her ultimate devastation. Endowed with a highly allegorical quality, this young vagrant shows himself at specific times when Karen feels particularly disturbed and concerned about the turn her life is taking in the city of Rome. He also turns into the personification of an *alter ego* whom she still does not dare accept as part of herself, since Karen catches sight of the young man "standing just outside the glass window" (75) in what arises as a mirror scene in which they significantly confront one another. As Otto Rank argues, the double functions as an insurance against the destruction of the *ego*, whereas, it eventually reverses this role to become the harbinger of death, insofar as, for Karen, he represents the embodiment of her desire but also of her eventual destruction. His presence becomes more recurrent as Karen gains insight into the fact that her disinhibited ways are often reproached and criticized in society, while the encounters with this young vagrant gradually take a different turn, since, at the beginning, the young man tries to attract her attention, whereas, it is ultimately Karen who feels attracted towards him. The gradual transformation that Karen's consideration of this young tramp undergoes epitomizes her gradual surrender to desire but also her ultimate capitulation to the pervasive sense of vice and corruption that has been haunting her. Furthermore, the age gap between both partners evokes and even exaggerates the age difference with Paolo, which symbolically enables her to exert her female dominance once again as an older woman over a younger and weaker man.

Performing Age: The Youthful Gaze, the Scandal of Anachronism, Age Defiance

As a result of becoming increasingly aware of having been banished from the stage and no longer being the object of the gaze to which she had grown accustomed in her youth, Karen intends to move to Rome in an attempt to escape from a pervasive sense of being drifted away, which also underpins her purpose of avoiding the imminent fate of growing old. Her stay in Rome thus underscores her need to evade being constantly reminded of her age,

and hence, to subvert the ageist discourses to which she has been subjected, thus giving herself a chance to reimagine her aging process from her own perspective. Accordingly, it is by herself and in a foreign city—far away from everything and everyone she knows—that Karen moves from gaining insight into her process of growing old to being able to overlook the cultural dictates of age, as she finds herself in an unfamiliar setting which helps her diminish her inhibitions and where she hopes not to be judged by the same standards of age constraining older women. As is stated,

> [t]he knowledge that her beauty was lost had come upon her recently and it was still occasionally forgotten. It could be forgotten, sometimes, in the silk-filtered dusk of her bedroom where the mirrors disclosed an image in cunningly soft focus. It could be forgotten sometimes in the company of Italians who had never seen her as other than she now was […]. But Mrs. Stone had instinctively avoided contact with women she had known in America, whose eyes, if not their tongues, were inclined to uncomfortable candour. (12)

Soon after her arrival, Karen refuses to take part in social gatherings and instead indulges in the seclusion of her palazzo, where, from its terrace, Karen symbolically enacts the process of transmuting from 'spectacle' to spectator. Initially giving in to the ageist discourse that banished her prematurely from the stage, Karen holds on to a performance of age that necessarily obliges her to act older than her age. According to Gullette, the performance of aging—in life as well as on stage—is achieved through the use of "age effects" (171), which contribute to revealing the constructive quality of aging. Karen holds on to her performance of age, wearing discreet clothes and a modest hairstyle that allow her to pass unnoticed in the street, while she also prefers spending her evenings at home, avoiding her old acquaintances. Nevertheless, Karen gradually notices that she is not permitted to act older either, since, having abandoned her career as an actress, when she meets some of her American friends, she cannot help identifying that their greeting often carries "the unspoken shock of her changed appearance, the hair that she was allowing to grey and the face and figure that had retired as palpably from public existence" (37). Besides, Karen's new acquaintances, mostly Paolo and the Contessa, also seem to judge her for acting older than her age. Upon meeting her for the first time, Paolo detects "the existence of a certain loneliness" (27) in her, while, when Karen initially rejects Paolo's advances, the Contessa censures the former actress's decorous behavior and accounts for her demure manners claiming that, "she has not yet reconciled herself to her age" (30), thus judging her for adopting a sort of age performance that categorises her as older than her chronological age.

Nonetheless, Karen's performance of age is mostly deprecated when she pretends to act younger. Leaving behind her age effects which contributed to characterising her as older, Karen changes her hairstyle and starts wearing

sophisticated and vivid outfits. It is when she intends to escape the constraining cultural dictates of age that Karen often gains insight into the fact that she is constantly judged by what Woodward defines as "the youthful structure of the look" ("Performing Age" 162). Soon after meeting her in Rome, her friend Meg Bishop reminds Karen of the fact that "it was a mistake for you to play Juliet at the age of Mrs. Alving" (16), while, when she realizes that Karen is dating a younger man, Meg immediately typecasts her friend as a "stock character of a middle-aged woman crazily infatuated with a pretty young boy" (19), thus disapproving of Karen merely on account of the fact that she is acting younger than her age.

Drawing on the inherent performative qualities of the discourses of aging, Basting regards the aging process as an eminently performative act both on and off the stage. Similarly, Gullette also refers to the performance of age in everyday life. In Williams's novel, Karen exemplifies this double dimension of aging, since, even if she no longer plays any character on the stage as a professional performer, she is still highly conscious of her inherent performative nature—legacy of her past as an actress—, while her relationship with Paolo is often portrayed through recurrent references to performance. In the course of Karen's romantic infatuation with the young Italian, it is revealed that "nobody was more aware of the automatic quality of her gestures than Mrs. Stone herself" (84). When she often hears the echoes of her friend Meg's reprobating words about "the ridiculously unsuitable part for a middle-aged woman to play" (99) with regard to her ill-matched role in terms of age on the stage, Karen cannot help judging herself, this time for performing age off the stage, when she starts her affair with young Paolo. Respectively, when he hears nasty rumors about the age gap characterising his relationship with Karen, Paolo rebukes her for having "made a spectacle" (95) of herself, while she retorts claiming that, if they "were playing a scene together on the stage" (95), the audience would hardly notice her because of his good looks. Accordingly, recurrent references to performance in order to describe their relationship inevitably bring attention to the performative tendencies of both characters taking part in this symbolic play off the stage.

As Paolo's condemnatory words indicate—suggestive of the prevailing dictates of age and gender—, it is implied that, by means of her performance of age that leads her to act younger than her age, Karen runs the risk of causing "a scandal of anachronism," to use Mary Russo's term ("Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism" 21), which involves not conforming to normative ideas of age-appropriate behaviour. In this respect, as Woodward argues, age and gender structure each other to declare the aging female body at once invisible and hypervisible ("Performing Age" 163). Karen's performance of youth apparently seeks to retain the male gaze, as she had done during her years of splendour as an actress, whereas, through the acknowledged realization of her age, Karen also subverts the former meaning of her traditional role as a female commodity

and constant object of the male gaze. As a case in point, when Karen notices the presence of the scruffy young vagrant in the streets of Rome, on one occasion, she decides to confront him boldly, exclaiming, "look at my face! [...] why do you follow me, can't you see my face?" (100). Through her exclamation, Karen symbolically appears to attract the male gaze in order to expose and disapprove of its biased partiality for youth, while, at the same time, being conscious that her image no longer matches that of the enthralling object that used to attract the attention of male admirers, she also contributes to subverting the cultural dictates of age. Hence, Karen appears to indulge in a masochistic act that she inflicts upon herself, as she obliges the young boy to stare at her face, while she also reproaches him for what he perceives as the male gaze's obsession with youth. This passage becomes highly reminiscent of a scene in Billy Wilder's film *Sunset Boulevard* (see Miquel-Baldellou 2018), in which Norma Desmond also demands the attention of her young partner, Joe Gillis, asking him to scrutinize her face and begging him to stare at her. Aware that the image that her face projects no longer matches that of the films and old photographs in her youth, Norma requests Joe's attention, but, in doing so, she also symbolically chastises him for his obsession with youth and his displeasure with her aging looks.

Karen's moments of capitulation to a culturally-established ageist discourse recur through the final stages of her relationship with young Paolo. While she accompanies him to buy him fine new clothes, she finds herself reflecting upon the fact that she is thirty years his senior, which immediately leads her to feeling "ashamed of herself" (94). Karen gains insight into the fact that she has been acting young, while she has been growing old, and this moment of epiphany reaches its climax when, in the course of an argument, in which Paolo feels overwhelmed by Karen's affluence and apparent self-assuredness, he retaliates stating,

> "[y]ou won't listen to me," he hissed. "You won't take any warning. You are too puffed up with your glory, your wealth, your magazine fashion-pictures, your wax-paper king of a husband that left you millions. But this is a very old city. Rome is three thousand years old, and how old are you? Fifty?"
> "Fifty!" she gasped. (113)

For the first time, Karen finds herself admitting her chronological age, which symbolically breaks her character and the spell that helped her act younger and indulge in age performance, while it also obliges her to discontinue her performance of youth. As her relationship with Paolo comes to an end, when he abandons her for a younger woman, Karen apparently lets go of her mask of youth, as she feels rebuked for having dared subvert the dictates of female aging. Nonetheless, instead of accepting the evidence that her youth is drifting away—as she reminds herself on many occasions throughout the novel—she is determined

to give free vent to desire and propitiate an encounter with the scruffy young tramp that has been chasing and haunting her. Through an ambivalent end that gives closure to Williams's novel, this final encounter can be interpreted symbolically as either the fulfilment of Karen's passionate yearning, or rather, the confirmation of her ultimate destruction at the hands of a character that turns into the personification of rough desire. In any case, far from succumbing to the constraining dictates that oblige her to act her age, Karen indulges in her nostalgia for her lost youth, insofar as her embrace of this young man once more enacts her defiance of age standards and her ever-lasting wish to act against her age.

The Aging Other: Mirrored Images, Alternative Mirrors, Imagined Selves

In a series of different passages in the novel, Karen stares at her reflection in the mirror at introspective moments when she shifts from object to subject of the gaze, thus scrutinizing herself through the ageist discourse she has imbibed and, alternatively, reimagining herself, insofar as the performative quality of aging ultimately reveals age as a cultural construct and paves the way for subverting and transforming age dictates. As a case in point, after encountering her friend Meg Bishop at a party and bearing her reproaches as a result of her flirtatious ways with young men, when Karen finds herself alone in her bedroom, a mirror scene ensues which turns into a reflective moment whereby she succumbs to the dictates of age-appropriateness. As is stated, "she [Karen] closed the door which became her face in a mirror, and she saw the face looking at her, somewhat curiously, somewhat uneasily, and she looked at it, a flush spread over the face as if she had surprised it in doing something that it was ashamed of… the drift" (20). As Sally Chivers argues, it is at these moments that the character of the aging actress, looking at herself from without, succumbs to "external norms of age-appropriate behavior" (219) addressed to women, and judges herself from the perspective of the gaze of the other, which she has imbibed since her youth.

Furthermore, Karen surrounds herself with theatrical keepsakes and photographs of her as cast in the roles that she has played during her career, together with a picture of her last part as Juliet, which reminds her of the impracticality of playing certain characters anymore owing to age dictates. As is portrayed in the novel, "as if she were about to discover some carefully guarded secret about herself, Mrs. Stone started towards the mirror with the photograph in her hand, but half way there she turned back and slipped the picture, like a card of ill omen, into the bottom of the pile" (102). These symbolically substitute mirror images stand in sharp contrast with the actual image that the mirror reverts back and serve the purpose of underlining the passage of time and her process of aging.

Conversely, according to Lucy Fischer, specular moments in which characters gaze in the mirror also denote a sense of doubling between the aging reflection and a youthful image frozen in time that becomes superimposed, paving the ground for alternative images that contribute to reimagining aging (171). As is depicted in the novel, in another mirror scene, it is described that "her face in the mirror, which she could see at an angle from where she sat, became continually more indistinct and lovely, as the knowledge of having nothing to fear moved steadily deeper within her" (52). Karen is thus reflected in alternative mirrors that offer her ancillary mirror replications of her image and allow her to imagine an alternative way of performing female aging.

Henceforth, Karen gradually adopts a bifocal view of herself, as a result of the increasing gap between her youthful image as shown in old photographs and the image of herself that she beholds in the mirror, but also because of the growing difference between the aging image that she starts being associated with by old acquaintances and the rejuvenated appearance that she decides to hold on to in the course of her relationship with Paolo. If Karen no longer feels identified with her former image in the photographs of her youth, she also refuses to be categorized as one of the grotesque aging ladies whom Paolo is used to courting, contending that she is not "a wretched old fool of a woman with five hairs and two teeth in her head and nothing but money to give" (103), thus rejecting the role of a ludicrous aging lady with which the Contessa and, ultimately, Paolo may be willing to associate her. As a result of the pervasive fear of being relegated to the role of the female grotesque, to use Russo's term (*The Female Grotesque*), as time goes by, Karen is also haunted by another alternative mirror image which, at some point, she also considers emulating. Among her photographs and mementoes of her glorious past as an actress, Karen also keeps a card and photograph that she has recently been sent, which are strategically placed next to a clock suggesting the passage of time. As is described,

> [s]he [Karen] had drifted across the mantel and from it, from underneath the ornamental glass clock which exposed all its workings as it announced the steady drift of time, she removed a piece of magenta stationery folded about two other slips of paper. One was a tiny white card bearing the name of a surgeon in Paris. The other was a small photograph, showing a face curiously unreal beauty: unreal because it wore no expression, expressionless because the lines of it had been removed by the plastic surgeon whose name was in the card. And on the back of the photograph, in a handwriting that shook with tremors of exultation, was the short message: "This is how I look now!" (115)

Karen aptly keeps this photograph under a clock, which inevitably suggests the fleeting nature of youth, insofar as she feels constantly exposed to the scrutiny of her face and the necessity to match an ideal image of youth that her appearance

can no longer project. Being surrounded by the frozen image of her youthful physique, which reverts back in her old photographs, and being subjected to constant scrutiny and permanent self-inspection, Karen inevitably falls prey to the pressure of ageist dictates pervading her circle of friends and acquaintances through the relentless comparison between her former image legacy of her golden years as an acclaimed actress and her current image as a retired performer.

In contrast with all these substitute mirror images, Karen resorts to an effective way of reimagining her mirror appearance and projecting a more alluring image of herself. In the course of her affair with young Paolo, Karen turns him into her own younger mirror likeness by means of a number of scenes in which she enjoys beholding his young visage and athletic physique, hence symbolically turning him into an idealised Narcissus reflection that becomes her alternative youthful and male mirror image. In this respect, aware of Karen's infatuation with Paolo, her friend Meg Bishop reprimands her moralistically, exclaiming "isn't it odd [...] how women of our age begin all at once to look for beauty in our male partners?" (17), which ratifies the evidence that Karen has turned Paolo into an embodiment of her substitute mirror of youth. Nonetheless, on some occasions, the alternative mirror that Karen has found in Paolo meets an unexpected end, as it renders an opposite image that underlines her aging traits. As is conceded, Karen admits to herself that, "she could not bear to look at him [...] she felt ignored and excluded, and usually she would reach down to cover herself, outcast, ashamed [...] she averted her face and covered it with her dyed hair" (55). Consequently, in spite of the presence of embodied alternative mirrors, Karen cannot help scrutinizing the traces of aging that her actual or substitute image in the mirror still reflects back.

Karen's rejection of her image in the mirror calls to mind Woodward's theory of the mirror stage of old age, whereby the aging individual may feel that her fragmented mirror image does not truly match her unified self, thus noticing an increasing gap between the image of our bodies that we perceive of ourselves in the mirror and what we take to be our real selves ("The Mirror Stage of Old Age" 104). According to Jacques Lacan's psychological stage of development, known as the infant mirror stage, the infant is able to identify with her unified reflection in the mirror in sharp contrast with her self-perceived disunified body. Conversely, through Woodward's mirror of old age, the aging individual is unable to identify with the image projected in the mirror, as this fragmented image no longer corresponds with what the aging individual feels to be her truly unified self. Accordingly, when Karen stares at her reflection in the mirror□which can be symbolically interpreted as the return of Medusa's gaze in an attempt to turn herself into stone, and thus, stop the clock that propels aging—she catches sight of a certain grotesque quality with which she feels unable to identify.

In mirror scenes, Karen recognises her reflection as an aging other—as an intruder—thus evoking Beauvoir's words about the inability to identify the

aging self as our own. As Beauvoir further argues, the acknowledgment of old age comes from the figure of the other, since "within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old" (*The Coming of Age* 420). Aging is thus described as entailing a process of alienation which evokes the Freudian notion of recognising the aging other as a source of the uncanny, that is, as a familiar—albeit repressed—self awaiting to emerge. Furthermore, Susan Sontag refers to the fact that, in the case of women, this fragmentation between selves metaphorically takes effect through the split between a body and a face, and how each of them is judged by different standards (22). In this respect, in Williams's novel, Karen becomes aware of an increasing difference between her body and her face, since, as is described, "her body had flown like a powerful bird through and above the entangling branches of the past few years, but her face now exhibited the record of the flight" (92), thus gaining insight into the fact that she feels youthful and active in body, but judges herself as aged owing to the incipient lines she begins to perceive on her face.

Nonetheless, it is also at these moments of introspection that Karen determines to act against her age and her reaction acquires subversive and even protofeminist undertones, as these moments of self-awareness pave the way for the opportunity to take action and reimagine herself. Drawing on Woodward's theory of the mirror of old age, Leni Marshall makes reference to the concept of *méconnaissance* to argue that the misrecognition that these mirror scenes involve for the aging individual may also contribute to modifying the person's self-perception, hence underscoring the potential to envision alternative images of aging. To use Marshall's words, the misrecognition of the aging self in the mirror "creates the possibility for individuals to consciously participate in producing a new set of selves" (68) in old age. Upon contemplating her aging traits in the mirror and embracing the aging other that has remained repressed owing to age dictates, Karen is determined to give in to desire in her older years, thus imagining an alternative aging female self that subverts the constraining cultural perceptions of age and gender addressed to women.

Film Adaptations: Intertextualities, Approaches, Performers

Given the constant presence of dualities and mirror scenes in the text, Williams's novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, is also endowed with a remarkable metanarrative and self-referential quality. Through different film adaptations based on the original novel, attention is constantly drawn to the figure of a female performer playing the role of an actress, to the extent that the story portrayed ultimately transcends the screen. In this sense, it can be argued that in José Quintero's 1961 film adaptation and in Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 TV remake, performers Vivien Leigh and Helen Mirren, as women actors themselves also at a later stage in their careers, respectively

replicated some of the plights befalling the character of Karen Stone as an actress.

Ten years after playing the role of Blanche Dubois in Elia Kazan's film adaptation of Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Vivien Leigh was chosen to play the role of Karen Stone on the screen when she was in her late forties. In José Quintero's film adaptation, Warren Beauty, who was then in his mid-twenties, played the part of young Paolo. In the novel, the age gap between Karen and Paolo extends to thirty years, whereas, off the screen, Vivien Leigh was scarcely twenty years Warren Beauty's senior. The diminished age difference between the actors had the effect of somehow blurring the intended age gap established between Karen and Paolo in the original novel, which was counteracted by means of resorting to age affectation—mostly through the adjustment of hairstyle, make-up, and clothes—which gave Vivien Leigh an intended older appearance in comparison with that of her male counterpart.

Not in an entirely dissimilar fashion to the case of Gloria Swanson, who made her return to the silver screen through her brilliant portrayal of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* after many years of absence, at the time, Vivien Leigh also seemed to be facing the later stages of her career as an actress and she was also going through a particularly testing period from a personal perspective. Having to cope with her divorce and feeling emotionally vulnerable, according to film reviewer Daniel Spoto, Vivien Leigh's situation at the time of shooting the film implied a case of life imitating art, given the parallelisms between the emotional struggles of the characters on the screen and the real-life actors who portrayed them. Quintero's film adaptation was considered quite bold at the time of its release, but its approach mostly displays a moralistic tone that gives way to a cautionary tale, which ultimately warns about the dangers of daring to defy the traditional cultural dictates of age and gender appropriateness. Vivien Leigh's performance of the role of Karen Stone brings attention to her vulnerability and fragility, and even though her affair with Paolo is necessarily taken as audacious and subversive, she is finally chastised and treated as an outcast, while she seems to accept her punishment gladly when she gives herself away to the young scruffy tramp, who personifies both desire and corruption, at the end of this film adaptation.

In comparison, Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 television film featuring Helen Mirren as Karen Stone and Olivier Martinez as Paolo offers a significantly audacious adaptation of Williams's novel. In contrast with Quintero's film, in which Vivien Leigh and Warren Beauty matched the age of Karen and Paolo in the original text more faithfully, in Ackerman's adaptation, the actors playing the leading roles were somehow older than the characters in the novel, Mirren being in her late fifties and Olivier being in his late thirties. In relation with Vivien Leigh's performance, Helen Mirren's interpretation portrays Karen Stone as

a determined and strong-minded woman, who takes the lead all through the course of her affair with young Paolo and who consciously gives free vent to her sexual inhibitions. As indicative of the boldness that mostly characterizes this adaptation, scenes of explicit intercourse and moments in which Paolo contemplates Karen's naked body contribute to emphasizing the liberated and uninhibited ways characterizing this contemporary portrayal of Karen Stone.

Furthermore, Ackerman's film adaptation resorts to different instances of intertextuality, which refer back to other films also dealing with performance both on and off the stage. As cases in point, as Karen Stone attends a party, she meets an old friend of hers who happens to be a playwright that strongly resembles Tennessee Williams, while the character of the Contessa is played by Anne Bancroft, who acquired fame for her performance of the character of Mrs. Robinson in Mike Nichols's film *The Graduate* (1967), and precisely, for playing a similar part to that of Karen Stone. Analogously, prior to being finally abandoned by Paolo, while they are watching films featuring Karen in her youth, her face becomes superimposed over that of her youthful image on the screen, thus creating another mirror scene which draws attention to her performative tendencies both on and off the screen, and which is inevitably reminiscent of a scene in *Sunset Boulevard*, in which the current image of Norma Desmond also superimposes over that of her younger self as shown in her old films.

In contrast with Vivien Leigh's performance, Mirren's resolute and even histrionic performance turns Karen Stone into what Russo defines as an epitome of "the female grotesque" (*The Female Grotesque* 1) to refer to aging female characters that are portrayed as mostly disturbing, since they reject giving up their sexual allure in spite of the prevailing cultural dictates of age and gender. In a particularly distressing scene in this film adaptation, while Karen is sleeping, Paolo stares at her face, and using his fingers, he starts blurring her make-up mockingly, giving her a most ludicrous appearance of which she remains totally unaware. Hence, in spite of her boldness and determination as displayed in this film adaptation, Karen is still ostracized and sanctioned for daring to subvert the assumptions of age and gender conventions. Nonetheless, if in Quintero's film adaptation, Vivien Leigh was actually facing the later stages of her career as an actress, as also happens to Karen in the original novel, in contrast, in Ackerman's film, Helen Mirren regained access to the limelight precisely for portraying a character that dares act against her age.

Conclusion

In Williams's novel, Karen Stone's performative tendencies both on and off the stage underline the constructed quality of age and gender. By means of acting her age and acting against her age, while adjusting her roles according to gender discourses, her performance acquires an ambivalence that can be

described as both compliant and subversive according to prevailing cultural dictates. Having been exposed to normative age-and-gender roles, which have rendered her prematurely aged and have also banished her from the stage too soon, her performance of age and gender off the stage contributes to disrupting these cultural discourses in which she feels entrapped. Through a series of mirror scenes, which metaphorically stand for moments of introspection and reflection, Karen both rejects her image and attempts to reimagine it, as she re-envisions alternative ways of performing age and gender. Besides, her final encounter with the young vagrant is also suffused with significant ambivalent connotations, as it confirms her final surrender to corruption, but it also stands for her ultimate will to release her inhibitions and take final action to sanction her role as the subject of the gaze. As Williams's novel, published in 1950, is revisited and reimagined through contemporary film adaptations, it could be argued that the character of Karen Stone has been acquiring more protofeminist undertones, thus gradually shifting from ostracism to vindication, and from being age and gender compliant to becoming more age and gender subversive.

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Biography

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AMERICAN LITERATURES

ISSN 2789-889X