



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	The Body: Inscriptions, Porosities, Afterlives.
Author	Dongxuan Zhao
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

The Body: Inscriptions, Porosities, Afterlives.

Dongxuan Zhao

University of Edinburgh

The body is at once our most immediate point of contact with the world and one of the most unstable categories through which that world is organised. It is often treated as a biological given: the primary site of perception, selfhood and agency. Yet bodies are never simply given. They are interpreted, regulated, represented, and valued through social, cultural, and political structures that determine which bodies appear normal or deviant, familiar or foreign, vulnerable or threatening. Feminist, queer, postcolonial, disability, and critical race scholarship has repeatedly shown that embodiment is inseparable from histories of power. Judith Butler's account of the performative materialisation of sexed bodies, Sara Ahmed's work on orientation and belonging, and material feminist approaches attentive to the entanglement of bodies, matter, and environment have all unsettled the assumption that bodily difference precedes the structures through which it becomes meaningful.

If bodies acquire meaning through the structures that surround them, it also becomes difficult to say where a body begins and ends. Skin might appear to provide an obvious boundary, separating interior from exterior and self from world, but bodily life constantly troubles this distinction. Bodies breathe, ingest, excrete, bleed, and decay. They touch and are touched by other bodies and environments. They are also made meaningful beyond their material limits: a bodily feature can come to signify gender, race, nation or historical difference; bodily sensations can retain memories that resist linguistic expression; and bodies that are absent or dead may continue through objects, images, archives, and cultural memory. To study the body is therefore to ask how bodies are marked by meaning, how they cross their apparent limits, and how they persist beyond them.

We are grateful to Bradley Tooke for his guest contribution, which depicts the body as bound to habitual time and to rhythms of repetition, the pauses that punctuate them, and habits that resist interruption. His image serves as a visual threshold to the issue, presenting bodily form not as fixed or self-evident but as shaped by accumulated habit and time.

It is from this instability that the 37th issue of *FORUM* takes its point of departure. The contributions in this issue approach the body through fiction, poetry, film, and biography, examining how histories are inscribed upon bodies, how bodily boundaries become permeable, and how embodiment survives absence and death. We have arranged the articles accordingly in the following sections: Inscriptions, Porosities, and Afterlives.

Inscriptions

The first group of articles, Inscriptions, concerns how cultural identities, political conflicts, and regional and national histories take material form. In Alessandra Way's "The Limping Mother(land)", Immacolata's body in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* becomes inseparable from constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'. Her limp, domestic confinement, and maternal identity evoke longstanding representations of Southern Italy as feminised, culturally inferior, and impeded in relation to the North. Immacolata's body thus becomes an allegorical terrain on which regional hierarchy and the internalised shame attached to Southern identity are made readable. A similar movement between individual anatomy and collective history structures Danielle Blee's "Catholic Ritual and the Grotesque Moral of Trouble(d) Bodies: The Role of the Stomach, Digestion, and Bodily Experience in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983)". The stomach, digestive tract, womb, and other organs become sites where the Northern Irish body politic, Catholic ritual, hunger, guilt, sacrifice, and sectarian violence intersect. Blee reads the body as an interpretive structure for national and religious history, one in which history is swallowed, digested, rejected, and suffered through flesh. Sarah Kenchington's "Hierarchies of Flesh" reads Darky Gardiner, an Indigenous Australian soldier, alongside Choi Sang-min, a Korean conscript in the Japanese army. Their positions reveal how the prisoner-of-war camp intensifies intersecting settler-colonial and imperial hierarchies, rendering differently colonised bodies vulnerable, disciplined, and expendable while complicating the distinction between victim and perpetrator. These three articles ask, in different ways: How does a body come to mean more than itself? A limp becomes a geography. A stomach becomes religious and political history. The beaten body becomes the material record of intersecting empires.

Porosities

The articles grouped under Porosities explore the permeability of bodies and their openness to other species, substances, and environments. This openness is central to Yufeng Li's "A Nonhuman Too Human: Posthuman Embodiment in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013)", which presents skin as an unstable interface. By placing an alien within a human body, the film disrupts the assumed alignment of embodiment, identity, and species. Yet Li identifies a paradox: even as *Under the Skin* reaches beyond anthropocentrism, its treatment of femininity and gender returns to humanist conventions. Porosity becomes political in Yi Song's "'Our Bodies are Hydrophilic': Queer Hydro-Politics in Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* (2017)". Tracing fluids from blood, sweat, and semen to the waters of the Seine, the article challenges the heteronormative conception of the body as a sealed container. Fluids associated with infection and contamination instead enable shared vulnerability, collective action, and trans-corporeal relations between queer bodies and their environments. Maeve Stemp's "Wot For? Rot and Fertility in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Woman at the Store' (1912)" places women, animals, and plants within an assemblage in which rot interrupts the logic of finite consumption. Decomposition does not signify bodily failure alone: it returns matter to circulation and creates limited possibilities for resistance to patriarchal and colonial exploitation. These articles ask what becomes possible when skin no longer guarantees the limits of the self, when fluids pass between bodies or when decomposition returns bodily matter to larger ecological assemblages.

Afterlives

The final group, Afterlives, asks what happens when embodiment outlasts physical presence and persists through memory, archives, spectatorship, and cultural translation. Isabel Schueler's "Spooks, Phantoms, and Blossoming Corpses: Corporeality in the Early Combatant Poetry of the First World War" considers poems in which damaged bodies, spectral figures, and material objects redistribute personhood after death. Letters, clothes, identity discs, and flowers carry traces of the self, challenging the body's capacity to contain personhood under the destructive conditions of war. Questions of persistence and recovery also animate Malissa White's "In/Visible Women: Transtemporal Black Lesbian Bodies in *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The Mark of Lilit* (1986)". Through the concept of transtemporal visibility, White shows how self-reflexive filmmaking inserts Black lesbian

subjectivity into histories and mythologies from which it has been marginalised. Visibility becomes not simply representation in the present but a way of inhabiting past, present, and future simultaneously. Ximena Oñate Garcia's "Active Archive: Haptic Reconstruction in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* (2003)" turns to bodies made absent by political violence. Addressing the disappearance of Carri's parents during Argentina's dictatorship, the film's haptic and sensory address allows spectators to encounter the gaps and erasures of that history. The archive becomes an act of reconstruction rather than a repository of dead evidence.

Carlos Augusto Pereira dos Santos Junior and Marta Regina Maia's "The Mediated Body: Memory and Performativity in the Journalistic Biography of David Bowie" examines the retrospective construction of a public body. Bowie's gestures, clothing, sexuality, physical difference, and visual self-fashioning acquire coherence through testimony, affective memory, and biographical narration. Biography thus produces the embodied figure it appears to recover. Finally, Shiyuan Zhang's "The Aesthetics of Displacement: Sensory Experience and Cultural Translation in Transnational Cinema" describes the body as both an archive and a medium of cross-cultural experience. Sensation can endure even when it cannot be translated into language; cultural difference is not merely represented but perceived and remembered through the bodies of characters and spectators. Here, 'afterlives' names the ways bodies persist beyond their immediate material presence: through objects, film, biography, and sensation

Across these contributions, the body refuses to remain where we place it: it is boundary and crossing, matter and metaphor, presence and trace, made legible through histories and relations that exceed it. To encounter the body is also to encounter the relations through which bodies become legible and go on being read.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Day's Pause III
Author	Bradley Tooke
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.



Bradley Tooke, *Day's Pause III*, 2026
Ink monoprint on paper, 27cm x 17c

Day's Pause III

Bradley Tooke

Independent Artist

Time binds ... naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation.

Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*

Smoking has been a part of what I have done every day for twenty years now, excluding some failed attempts to kick the habit. Sometimes it's more present, sometimes less, but it's pretty much always been there. As I now am in the midst of another attempt to kick the habit, I find myself thinking on what it does that makes it so difficult to break the addiction. What makes something which is so very clearly bad for our bodies so difficult to rid from ourselves?

While this is perhaps a more poetic view than the habit deserves, smoking has always offered a pause, a boundary, a moment. It's through these pauses that, for me, smoking has inevitably become the punctuation of a day. Those (roughly) twenty moments of a day when you prepare yourself.

The full stop after completing a task, the dash between approaching and doing something daunting, the ellipses of not saying or doing something you do not want to. Days are punctuated by it, integrated into it.

I find myself, now attempting to not smoke, wondering what do I do when I have finished a task? How do I bookend that? What marker, act, activity, denotes the end of one thing and the beginning of another?

The work given is about this habit. A print of smoke patterns in tar black on one composite sheet of twenty cigarette papers – representing a day's smoking.

Works Cited

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010. *Duke University Press Books*, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184>.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	The Limping Mother(land): Reading Immacolata in Elena Ferrante's <i>Neapolitan Novels</i> as an Allegory for Constructions of Southern Italian 'Backwardness'
Author	Alessandra Way
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

The Limping Mother(land): Reading Immacolata in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* as an Allegory for Constructions of Southern Italian 'Backwardness'

Alessandra Way

University of Edinburgh

This article examines how the limping mother, Immacolata, in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels functions as an allegory for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'. Drawing on close reading, feminist theory, Orientalism, and socio-political readings of Italy and its South, it argues that Immacolata's maternal role reflects largely Anglophone constructions of Italy's contemporary global identity. Immacolata's domestic confinement as a mother in patriarchal Naples mirrors constructions of Italy's South as feminine. Her limping body functions as a corporeal allegory for Orientalist narratives of Italy's national weakness, and the constructed 'crippling' effect of the Mezzogiorno that contributes to Italy's 'backwards' global identity. Lastly, Elena's matrophobic rejection of Immacolata stages the contemporary phenomenon of internal Italian migration from South to North, and to countries outside Italy. That these parallels can be drawn from a text written by an Italian author suggests that Ferrante deliberately reveals the internalised shame of Southern Italian identity, demonstrating the permeation of these constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness' into Southern Italians' sense of self. This article demonstrates Immacolata's effectiveness as an allegorical figure for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian identity, in itself revealing the problematics of these perceptions. By repositioning the marginalised maternal body as a site of comment in Italian studies, this article provides a critical view of global representations and perceptions of Italian identity. This suggests the need for greater critical engagement with Orientalist framings of Italian identity, particularly within Anglophone media, and calls for deeper examination of Italy's associated stereotypes.

Introduction

Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* are amongst the most globally consumed pieces of contemporary Italian literature. Known for her dizzyingly visceral writing style (Milkova), Ferrante's novels explore mothers, daughters, and female friendship within a violent Naples that has "positively positioned" the city for foreign readers (Avalle 19). While scholarship exploring Ferrante's daughters and the friendship between Elena and Lila is well-saturated,

with notable scholars including Emanuela Caffè, Ruth Glynn, Stiliana Milkova, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, Ferrante's written mothers are comparatively understudied. One such figure is Immacolata Greco, mother of the protagonist, Elena, in Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, whose limping body haunts the narrative despite her limited textual presence. Italy has been historically associated with the maternal image, through the "glorioso archetipo" (Bravo 139) of the "powerful, self-sacrificial, possessive, suffering, resilient" *mamma italiana* (Giorgio 120). It is therefore pertinent to examine Immacolata's maternal role in Ferrante's work, and what her presentation in the novels signifies for Italian identity given these novels' global readership.

This article argues that Immacolata functions as an allegory for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'. Immacolata's role as a domestic service provider mirrors constructions of Italy's South as feminine. Her limping body evokes the historic Southern Question¹ and the perceived 'crippling' effect of the Mezzogiorno. Further, Elena's rejection of her mother(land) stages the contemporary phenomenon of internal Italian migration from South to North, and to countries outside Italy. As a Neapolitan mother, Immacolata is closely linked to Southern Italian identity. Due to historic divides between Southern and Northern Italian identity, it is pertinent to examine what Immacolata means for Italy's South, rather than homogenising her body as an allegory for the whole country. I approach these themes through close readings of Ferrante's texts, in which I draw on the feminist theory of "matrophobia", Edward Said's framework of Orientalism, and socio-political readings of the Mezzogiorno. This allegorical comparison reveals the problematics of dominant constructions of Southern Italy as culturally inferior – constructions which are frequently achieved, I will show, through Orientalist discursive mechanisms.

Scholars widely agree that British voices have been instrumental in constructions of Italian identity (Thorpe; Robinson; Patriarca). From the "Grand Tour" tradition of writing by young British aristocrats travelling to Italy to complete their cultural education, through to representations of Italy in Romantic literature, all the way to contemporary media on Italy,

¹ The Southern Question is a defining aspect of Italian national politics and identity. The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci in his 1926 work, which articulates the discourse surrounding the North/South divide within Italy, where the South is perceived as economically, politically, and socially inferior to the North. This is a problem reflected in infrastructure inequalities between Northern and Southern Italy, and it continues to define and divide Italians today.

British voices have been particularly influential in constructing Italian identity. Further, the global circulation of Anglophone media means that these representations achieved an exceptional degree of visibility and longevity, and that they continue to impact global perceptions of Italy. Dickie's 1999 work explains how British voices construct Italy as politically, socially, and economically inferior to Britain's constructed cultural superiority, defined by an umbrella term of 'backwardness'. This denotes a rhetoric of the country "'lagging behind' and 'catching up' relative to the economies of Northern Europe" (Agnew 25), and of an indolent, work-shy population (Patriarca 53). Crucial to my analysis of Immacolata as a Neapolitan mother is the way these British voices label the South as the extreme of this 'backwardness'. Southern Italy is described as a land of primitiveness, corruption, femininity, and irrationality; the scapegoat for the country's overarching perception as 'backwards' in comparison to the modern countries of civilisation in Northern Europe (Dickie; Gramsci; Casillo). Schneider posits that this perception stems from the Grand Tour era, where British tourists were particularly sensitive to the squalor of southern cities (Schneider 4).

Thorpe and Robinson have crucially employed Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to elucidate this British construction of Italian identity. They apply Said's original framework, which posits that Oriental identity is constructed as a social and moral inferior Other in opposition to perceived Occidental cultural superiority (Said). Whilst Thorpe acknowledges that the "Saidian paradigm" (Thorpe 12) is inadequate in the Italian case, due to Italy's European status and how it has in part been "positively idealised" (Thorpe 14) by British voices, I argue that a framework of Orientalism is applicable to the case of Italian identity, as the same discursive mechanisms are at work as in the construction of Oriental identity. Italy, like the Orient, is mediated as indolent, morally corrupt, struggling economically, and is constructed in opposition to an identifiable, culturally dominant Other. Schneider constricts her application of Said's framework, arguing for an internal Orientalism *within* Italy whereby Southern identity is constructed in opposition to Northern identity. She argues that British voices overtly expressed distaste for Southern Italy, painting the country as having been "dragged down by its southern half" (Schneider 8) and contributing to an internalised shame that resulted in perceptions of Southern Italians "as racial or cultural others whose differences from northerners were intrinsic and for all time" (Schneider 12). As Immacolata

is a Neapolitan mother, and Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* are so closely linked to notions of Southern Italian identity in contrast to the North, this paper considers specifically Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'.

The paper is split into three sections. The first examines British constructions of Southern Italy as feminised, mirroring Immacolata's role as an archetypal woman limited to the domestic sphere. The second draws on Fredric Jameson's theory of the body as a national allegory, Said's Orientalism, and Schneider's theory of internal Orientalism to allegorise Immacolata's body with constructions of the 'limping' Italian South. It also applies Glynn's concept of the "northern gaze" as a literary articulation of Schneider's theory of internal Orientalism between Northern and Southern Italy. Glynn argues that, in Ferrante's novels, Elena's adherence to and success within the rules of the Italian education system represent the constructed civilisation of Northern Italy and Northern Europe outside Italy (Glynn, "Porosity" 67). I therefore frame Elena's narrative gaze as an Orientalist dominant voice that constructs her mother(land) in accordance with British Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity. The final section applies Adrienne Rich's definition of matrophobia: the fear of turning into one's mother, to explore Elena's relationship with Immacolata (Rich). I analyse how Elena's flight from the Neapolitan neighbourhood in which she grew up stages the reality of young Southern Italians' flight from the South, in a mass exodus to seek opportunities on higher ground, both further North in Italy and abroad. I frame this as representative of the deep permeation of British constructions of Italian 'backwardness' into the Italian cultural imagination. This angle of internalised shame also explains why these British constructions of 'backwardness' can be read through a fictional Italian body, written by an Italian writer. I argue that as Immacolata is narrated through the lens of Elena's shame of her mother(land), Ferrante deliberately reproduces these derogatory constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness', precisely to reveal their internalisation in Southern Italian self-perception. In this sense, Elena represents an Orientalist gaze upon her mother(land)'s constructed 'backwardness' both because she feels she is superior to it, and because she has internalised a shame and fear of living up to this identity.

This article contributes to Ferrante scholarship by repositioning the marginalised maternal body of Immacolata as an allegory for national identity. It positions a globally

consumed piece of contemporary Italian literature as a site of comment on British constructions of Southern Italian identity. Immacolata's character and body function as a successful allegory for British constructions of Southern Italian identity. My analysis reveals the derogatory nature and impact of these constructions, offering an original intersection between Italian literary studies and Orientalism. Interpreting a singular body as a national allegory reflects Fredric Jameson's 1986 theory of Third-World, post-colonial literary bodies as national allegories, which has been criticised for its Orientalist homogenisation of Third-World cultures and texts and its essentialist framing of Third-World literary bodies as necessarily collective and national (Ahmad). I recognise that applying this theory to Immacolata's body risks a reductive view of Italy and the Mezzogiorno, but I suggest that this is heuristic rather than totalising, as Jameson's logic reflects Orientalist constructions that have historically shaped perceptions of Italy and the Mezzogiorno (Thorpe; Robinson; Schneider). Ultimately, I argue that reading Immacolata's body as a national allegory both reveals and challenges the endurance of these dominant constructions of Southern Italian identity.

Immacolata and the Confinement of the Feminised Nation

In Ferrante's novels, Immacolata's maternal role of domestic provision allegorises the construction of Southern Italy as feminised, and therefore weak. Confined to the domestic sphere by her symbolic limp, she reflects reductive archetypes of femininity, thus thematically embodying the derogatory perception of Southern Italy as hyper-feminine in contrast to the more masculine North. Italians are characterised in Grand Tour literature as an effeminate people who lack the "military mettle" of other European countries (Casillo 84). The country connotes frivolity, emasculated down to its geological body which, whilst praised for its beauty, cannot compare to the "forbidding masculine ruggedness and magnitude" of Northern Europe (Casillo 138). Internally, Southern Italians are referred to as an anomalous "woman-people" (Dickie 1) in contrast to the "popolo-uomini" of the North (Glynn, *Naples and the Nation* 228). This makes Immacolata, as a Southern Italian mother, the embodied extreme of this historic construction of Italy and its South as feminine.

Throughout the novels, Immacolata remains confined to the domestic sphere, subordinated by patriarchal violence from her husband, who “sometimes beat her” (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 45). Significantly, her limp restricts her physical mobility, whilst also translating as a metaphor for “the traditional female confinement to the private sphere” (Caputi 643). Immacolata’s body therefore physically and symbolically demonstrates her compliance with her role as a female domestic labourer. This restriction to the domestic sphere extends outside Naples; despite geographically shifting from her home, she remains confined within domestic walls through Elena’s narrative gaze and is constantly defined by her confining limp. When caring for a feverish Elena in Pisa, Immacolata appears almost by magic in Elena’s domestic sphere. Any travel that she undergoes exists only in Elena’s imagination: “I thought of her alone [...] in an unknown city” (Ferrante, *New Name* 414), thus her existence outside the home is never tangibly recognised. Ferrante’s use of the verb “thought” articulates Elena’s first-person narrative control in her refusal to witness her mother’s existence outside the household; she *thinks* of her journey but does not *see* it. This highlights the way the narrative is mediated through Elena’s thoughts and indicates her status as an unreliable narrator. Moreover, during this visit, Immacolata’s “known footsteps” come from “the darkest depths of [Elena’s] mind” (Ferrante, *New Name* 412), indicating Elena’s shame of Immacolata: she has tried to hide her mother even from her own consciousness as she reinvents herself further North in Italy. This euphemistic but conscious reference to Immacolata’s gait suggests that Elena’s shame of her mother derives principally from her limiting limp. Elena’s narrative gaze therefore locks Immacolata away as a domestic tool, where she remains throughout the tetralogy, narratively defined and confined by her crippling limitations.

The Limping South

Immacolata’s body emerges as allegorically constitutive of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity, reflecting derogatory British constructions of Italy’s South as primitive and barbaric (Dickie; Gramsci). As a disabled Neapolitan mother, Immacolata is a productive site through which to examine Orientalist constructions of the Mezzogiorno’s status as the “ball and chain”; the symbolic dragging limb that impedes progress for Italy as a whole (Gramsci 33). Scholars have argued that Italy is ambivalent within the “Saidian

paradigm”, as Italy’s European status means that Italy ostensibly is part of the Occidental group that, within Said’s framework, have historically defined Oriental identity as their inferior (Thorpe 12). However, the same discursive mechanisms and rhetoric are at work in the construction of Southern Italian identity in opposition to dominant voices, warranting a critical analysis of the significance of this framing. That Immacolata’s body fits an allegorical representation of this stereotypically primitive and barbaric South reveals the impact of British voices on questions of Italian identity today and calls for a more nuanced examination of these stereotypes.

Avalle argues the *Neapolitan Novels* have “positively positioned” Naples in the minds of Ferrante’s readers (Avalle 19). Yet in the novel, Elena’s descriptions of the neighbourhood and of Immacolata’s body cement stereotypes of the South as a land of “lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric” people (Gramsci 33). Elena laments that her world was “full of words that killed: croup, tetanus, typhus ...” (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 33), echoing Naples’ former association with the “third world” (Hooper 277). This imagery of disease and decay is reflected in Immacolata’s body: as she reveals to Elena in *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), her limp was the result of a childhood illness from which she never fully recovered, indicating the community’s poverty and lack of access to medical care. Much as this limp symbolises female restriction to the domestic sphere, it also becomes a corporeal manifestation of the South’s perceived backwardness. If the South’s lack of development produces a generation of limping children, the Mezzogiorno is destined to be perceived as biologically limited. This reflects the derogatory discourse which represents Southern Italians as “biologically inferior” (Gramsci 33). Ferrante’s depiction of Naples therefore cements common constructions of Southern Italian identity, with Immacolata’s limp as symbolic of the South’s perceived backwardness.

Immacolata further embodies the South’s primitiveness through her portrayal as the antithesis to Elena’s education. Although she occasionally praises Elena’s achievements throughout the tetralogy, the construction of the narrative from Elena’s perspective frames Immacolata as the “persecutory shadow” that strives to halt her academic development (Caffè 40). Upon Elena’s return from Lila’s wedding at the beginning of *The Story of a New Name*, Immacolata hits her, knocking off her glasses. Elena shouts: “See what you’ve done? You’ve broken my glasses and now because of you I can’t study” (Ferrante, *New Name* 28).

She blames her mother's violence, itself characteristic of the neighbourhood's primitiveness, for threatening her education. These glasses symbolise intellectuality; a marker of difference between Elena and her uneducated family, whose eyes do not strain to read books. A lack of education indicates an intellectual primitiveness, and therefore, for Elena, Immacolata's violent attack against the educational tool of her glasses represents the incarnation of the primitive South. In this context, Immacolata is not merely a passive obstacle, but an aggressor with an insidious objective, positioning the South as a monstrous Other.

An Orientalist Matrophobia

Just as Southern Italy is depicted as barbaric in comparison to the civilised North (Schneider), Immacolata is presented as primitive in opposition to Elena's success. This reflects Glynn's argument that Elena represents the "northern gaze" (Glynn, "Porosity" 67). For Glynn, Elena is "susceptible to disciplinary power" (Glynn, *Naples and the Nation* 240), and she is presented in the novel as an exemplar of Northern models of political success. She can thus appear as an antithesis to the primitiveness of the South, despite her genetic condition as a Neapolitan. In this sense, the relationship between Immacolata and Elena becomes the literary articulation of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity, with Elena constructed as the culturally dominant Other. Indeed, Elena's narrative control presents her as superior to the neighbourhood and to her mother, whom she figuratively locks away in the domestic sphere.

One explanation for Elena's Orientalist framing of her mother is Elena's deep matrophobia of Immacolata. Throughout the tetralogy, Elena fears morphing into her mother, terrified that this limp will "dictat[e] her future" (Recio Ruíz 26), which mirrors Rich's definition of matrophobia (Rich). Fear of Immacolata and the stagnation that she and the neighbourhood connote is Elena's *unheimlich*; her motivation for escaping the maternal "abyss" (Caputi 641). Because Immacolata is continually associated with the neighbourhood and with forms of socio-economic stagnation, Elena's matrophobia extends beyond the maternal figure herself and becomes more representative of her feelings towards her *motherland*.

This sentiment is demonstrated through an accusation from Elena's husband, Pietro, who says that Elena is "just like [her] mother if she had had an education and had started writing novels" (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 67). For the reader, Immacolata and education are each other's symbolic antitheses throughout the narrative, so Pietro's statement appears as a paradox. It suggests that, as a non-narrating character, Immacolata has other qualities that Elena omits, reducing her to a state in which she is both inferior and opposite to Elena. Indeed, Elena seems to revel in the fact that "the venomous figure" of her mother "existed only in [her] memory" (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 183) as Immacolata nears death, suggesting she finds power in narrating her mother as she likes. Particularly due to Elena's retrospective narration, this fear of morphing into her mother and the consequent desire to present herself as her antithesis may in fact stem from Pietro's accusation of Elena's similarity to Immacolata. It is subsequently Elena's reductive portrayal of Immacolata that allows her to corporeally comply with the reductive stereotypes of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity. Ferrante reveals and reproduces derogatory stereotypes of Southern Italians through Immacolata's body, ultimately revealing Elena's Orientalist attitude towards her mother(land). Immacolata and her hated body can therefore be allegorised as the marginalised South in all respects.

Matrophobia and Flight from the Mother(land)

In the narrative arc of the tetralogy, Elena does not merely harbour matrophobic sentiments towards her mother, but actively severs herself from her mother(land). Exploring Elena's matrophobic flight from Immacolata, I draw a parallel between Elena's flight from the neighbourhood and the contemporary phenomenon of internal migration from Southern to Northern Italy and abroad.

At Lila's wedding, Elena actively breaks ties with her mother and the neighbourhood. She considers what would happen if she were to stay with her neighbourhood boyfriend, Antonio. She expresses discomfort that her mother "restrained [her]" (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 321) and conflates a relationship with Antonio as a necessary condition of the stagnation she associates with Immacolata and the neighbourhood. Remaining with Antonio would signify a transition to her mother's body: "staying near her meant staying in her

world, becoming completely like her. And if I became like her, who would be right for me if not Antonio?" (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 321–22). Meanwhile, Elena considers another romantic option, Nino Sarratore, who for her represents the option to use "education for upward mobility" (Ferrante, *Frantumaglia* 371). Elena is at a crossroads, represented through two love interests who signify juxtaposing lives, with her mother's physical grip restraining her from choosing for herself. Ultimately, this conflict culminates in Elena "pull[ing] [her] dress away" from Immacolata, physically severing herself from her mother's clutches, and metaphorically severing herself from the neighbourhood. It marks a turning point; Elena's resolve to disconnect from the hated mother(land) and to pursue her own path.

In Elena's matrophobic severance from her mother(land), she exchanges Immacolata for a Northern maternal counterpart, Adele Airola, her mother-in-law. Adele represents Immacolata's opposite; what Elena runs towards following her matrophobic rejection of her mother(land). The contrast between these two mother figures represents a textual articulation of the North/South divide. The contrast in Elena's presentation of Immacolata and Adele reveals Elena's clear preference for Northern values, as she matrophobically rejects the 'backwardness' of her Southern origins. Adele represents the educated class, possessing money, social status, and intellectual respect. For Elena, she is a means to gain academic and literary success, symbolising what she has always striven for in opposition to the neighbourhood's economic and intellectual stagnation. In contrast to the repulsive image of Immacolata, Elena describes Adele as "a wealthy, cultivated wife and mother" who is also a professional "able to exercise power" (Ferrante, *New Name* 448). Adele's expansive presence, existing in social, professional, and domestic spheres starkly contrasts Immacolata's confinement to the domestic sphere under Elena's narrative gaze. In allowing Adele to take up more space in her narration, Elena demonstrates her greater level of respect for Adele than for Immacolata.

Furthermore, at Elena's debut novel launch, Adele, who recommended Elena's book to be published, "tried tactfully to calm [Elena]", who "struggled with words" and "had a bitter taste in [her] mouth" (Ferrante, *New Name* 470). Adele assumes the role of a calming maternal figure, assuaging Elena's anxieties. She later "took [Elena] gently by the hand, she praised the way [Elena] had spoken of [her] book" (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 34),

protecting Elena in this new literary environment with a gentle tone. This maternal ideal is the antithesis to Immacolata, who has “a word of contempt for anything that happened to [Elena]” (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 132). Similarly, Immacolata appears as crude in opposition to the Airola family. When Pietro Airola is introduced to Elena’s family, Immacolata “appeared last, the sound of her crooked gait could be heard right after that of the toilet flushing” (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 91). This reference to both the toilet and Immacolata’s limping gait, in an overt show of her corporeal limitations, suggests her as ungainly and embarrassing to Elena, in stark contrast to the “cultivated” Adele. These contrasting Southern and Northern mothers therefore represent opposing worlds to Elena, and her narrative framing of the two highlights her derogatory view of her mother, representative of the South, and her idealised view of Northern Adele. She matrophobically rejects her own mother(land) and adopts a new, Northern maternal figure, one rendered in opposition to the stagnation, primitivity, and limitations of her Southern origins.

The Internalisation of Constructed Southern Backwardness

Elena’s matrophobic feelings towards her mother(land) constitute a literary remediation of the fear of inheriting the social, cultural, and economic limitations that Immacolata symbolises; that is, Southern Italy’s perceived backwardness. Elena’s trajectory of physical displacement from the South to the North of Italy throughout the *Neapolitan Novels’* narrative arc mirrors contemporary migration patterns among Southerners, many of whom are young graduates that leave the Mezzogiorno in pursuit of educational and professional opportunities in the Centre-North of Italy and abroad (SVIMEZ). Whilst these migration trends are fundamentally shaped by persistent economic inequalities and limited opportunities in the South compared to the more industrious North, Ferrante’s representation of Elena’s matrophobic rejection of her mother(land), alongside the clear historic permeation of British constructions of Southern backwardness, suggests a complementary cultural dimension. I argue that, alongside material factors, longstanding constructions of Southern Italian backwardness have been internalised by Southern Italians, contributing to forms of shame and disidentification that render departure from the South increasingly desirable.

A SVIMEZ report from 2026 demonstrates the marked statistical trend of migration from Italy's South to its Centre-North or abroad. Between 2002 and 2024, almost one million under-35s emigrated from Southern to Northern Italy. Over one third of this figure possessed at least one university degree. Similarly, between 2002 and 2024, over 210,000 under-35s migrated abroad from Southern Italy, and again a third of this figure were university graduates (SVIMEZ). Other studies on internal migration trends in Italy have described "the Centre-North as the core and the South as the periphery of Italy", in keeping with popular rhetoric surrounding the South's apparently marginalised status as a 'backward' region in comparison to the more industrious North (Piras 571). These trends are due to a structural lack of opportunities for young people in Southern Italy; an issue that is only exacerbated by skilled human capital leaving the South (SVIMEZ 4). Elena's matrophobic journey away from her mother(land) mirrors these trends, particularly as she ascends further North as she progressively gains more educational qualifications, social status, and fame. Indeed, her first progression away from the neighbourhood is when she must travel across Naples for high school, followed by an ascension to the Centre-North of Italy, to Pisa, for university, and culminating in her final settlement in Turin as an established writer and academic.

That this SVIMEZ report notes the marked migration trends specifically from the South of Italy demonstrates a regionally-particular trend of rejecting the South as a place of future life and career opportunities. Despite these migration trends being rooted in material causes that define the economic divide between Italy's North and South, I argue that there is also a cultural component to the development of an abandonment mentality, whereby the historic constructions of Southern Italy as inherently 'backwards' by Orientalist British voices have been internalised into the Southern Italian psyche. Just as Elena has an irrational fear of turning into her mother's hated body and becoming the corporeal embodiment of the neighbourhood's stagnation and primitiveness, I argue that a facet of the Southern Italian mindset of migration is due to a matrophobic fear of becoming synonymous with these derogatory constructions of 'backwardness' of their motherland.

Indeed, a study on perceptions of British and Italian national identity states that national identity is "deeply rooted in the construing of others' constructions, achieved through relationship and comparison" (Burr et al. 63). We can thus posit that Italy's

reputation as “lacking in a sense of national pride and identification” is influenced by relentless British constructions of Italian backwardness (Favero 151). As this takes its most extreme form in cases of the Italian South, which is constructed as primitive, backwards, and barbaric (Dickie; Gramsci) by British voices, we can also suppose that Southern Italians in particular have internalised this regional shame. The very nature of the Orientalist construction of Southern Italian inferiority against British cultural superiority instils the belief that there is a better elsewhere to flee to, as reflected in these migration trends. Indeed, Elena too flees her mother(land) to a more educated life in the North, and to the more civilised mother figure of Adele Airota, who can give her the opportunities she lacked in her Southern neighbourhood.

Inheriting (or Appropriating) the Mother’s Legacy

Elena reveals her mother’s name at the end of the tetralogy by naming her own child after Immacolata. This represents another matrophobic act and an effort to paint over Elena’s Southern origins. Caputi argues that the religious connotations of the name ‘Immacolata’ suggest redemption, making Elena’s naming of her child after her mother a forgiveness of Immacolata (Caputi 652). This initially seems to indicate forgiveness or reconciliation, yet it is significant that Elena names her child after her mother during Immacolata’s illness and death in *The Story of the Lost Child*. Elena reveals this name when, in Immacolata’s proximity to death, she is “diminished almost to nothing” (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 221). Immacolata is too physically weak to restrain her, and in revealing her name at this point, Elena reframes her mother’s legacy to fit her own life. Immacolata is reborn by name, but Elena’s academic success, her reputation for themes of sexual promiscuity in her published novels, and her untraditional family life oppose everything Immacolata represented. As Elena takes control of her mother’s name and reframes it under her own terms, she performs a metaphoric act of matricide, erasing her mother’s values and identity with this new Immacolata, born from Elena’s flesh.

Despite freeing herself of her Southern neighbourhood through education, and finally distancing herself from Immacolata at the time of her death, Elena inherits her mother’s limp during her first pregnancy. Elena says: “I was afraid that my mother’s gait had caught

up with me, that she had settled in my body, that I would limp forever, like her” (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 237). This language evokes the unsettling image of Immacolata as a malevolent shadow over Elena’s life, threatening her with this limp that has now “settled” inside Elena like a parasite. Wehling-Giorgi interprets the maternal body in Ferrante’s work as a site through which the transgenerational trauma of a violent, patriarchal society can be transferred, marked through its disability or scarring, such as Immacolata’s lame leg (Wehling-Giorgi 250). In this way, if Immacolata’s limp is a symbol of transgenerational trauma and this maternal limp is allegorically synonymous with the constructed primitive South, Elena’s inheritance of this limp is a literal marker of her Southern origins, despite her best efforts to escape them. This interpretation recalls the pessimistic view of Italy’s ontological “backwardness” (Agnew 23) and the rhetoric which has historically depicted Southern Italians as “*naturally backward*”, with their perceived biological inferiority used as the scapegoat for broader national difficulties (Foot 175; emphasis in original). As Neapolitan women, both Immacolata and Elena are genetic products and representatives of this constructed identity of Southern ‘backwardness’, and Elena’s inheritance of her mother’s physical defect therefore suggests the believed inescapability of the South’s constructed destiny towards failure. This explains why Elena has always irrationally believed her mother’s limp to be her future, and this literal internalisation of her limp symbolises a metaphorical internalisation of constructions of Southern ‘backwardness’. The ultimate realisation of this matrophobic fear suggests why Elena’s matrophobia is so vehement; she has become synonymous with the image of the mother(land) she so desperately wanted to escape.

The extremes to which Elena goes in rejecting her origins project her insecurity that they may still catch her up. Her matrophobia for her mother(land) does not dissipate after she escapes the neighbourhood, nor following her mother’s death. The fact of her narration of this story, which can be understood as a continual assertion of herself as literally and symbolically above her mother(land), suggests that Elena will forever live in fear of her mother(land). This demonstrates the extent of her internalisation of the shame of her Southern origins.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Immacolata functions as a successful allegory for dominant constructions of Southern Italian backwardness. British voices are especially prominent in constructing this identity, due to historical links between Italy and Britain with cultural and literary traditions such as the Grand Tour, and the global circulation of Anglophone media. I have argued that the mechanisms through which British voices have built Southern Italian identity reflect an Orientalist framework, whereby Southern Italy emerges as feminised, primitive, and barbarically 'backwards'. Whilst the North/South divide signifies an instability internal to Italian identity, I have shown that scholarship widely acknowledges the impact external British voices have had on constructions of Southern Italian identity, which has exacerbated the problematics of the Southern Question within Italy. Immacolata's character and body reflect these derogatory constructions of Southern Italian identity, revealing and reproducing notions of regional shame and perceived cultural inferiority. Immacolata's archetypal female confinement to the domestic sphere through her limiting limp reflects constructions of Southern Italians as hyper-feminised, whilst her presentation as uneducated, violent, and, crucially, limping, reflects constructions of Southern Italy as an impediment in comparison to the modern civilisation of Northern Italy. I have also identified a parallel between Elena's migration up the Italian peninsula throughout the *Neapolitan Novels*' narrative arc, and contemporary youth migration trends from Southern to Northern Italy and beyond. Acknowledging that this paper's scope focuses on constructions and perceptions of Southern Italian identity, I have suggested that a contributing factor to these migration trends is an internalisation of this 'backwards' identity by Southern Italians. I have argued that Ferrante deliberately reproduces stereotypes of Southern Italians' constructed backwardness through Immacolata's body precisely to reveal this internalised shame and its impact, as demonstrated through Elena's disparaging narrative gaze upon her mother, and her ultimate flight from her mother(land).

The very fact that such constructions can be recognised and read through Immacolata's body by a British scholar – myself – evidences their impact. This article contributes to Ferrante scholarship by re-positioning the marginalised maternal body as an active site of study within the *Neapolitan Novels*, and the allegorical comparison I have drawn calls for active engagement with how Southern Italians have internalised British narrations of Italy.

Indeed, narrating a nation through one body has its limits, as shown by how neatly Immacolata fits into these externally constructed stereotypes.

Works Cited

- Agnew, John. "The Myth of Backward Italy in Modern Europe." *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, edited by Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 23–42.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text*, no. 17, 1987, pp. 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466475>.
- Avalle, Arianna. "The Ultimate Ferrante Experience: Convergence Culture, Literary Tourism and the Quest for Authenticity." *Italian Culture*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2021, pp. 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01614622.2021.1938841>.
- Bravo, Anna. "La nuova Italia: madri fra oppressione ed emancipazione." *Storia della maternità*, edited by Marina D'Amelia, Laterza, 1997.
- Burr, Viv, et al. "Construing the Cultural Other and Self: A Personal Construct Analysis of English and Italian Perceptions of National Character." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 39, 2014, pp. 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.09.012>.
- Caffè, Emanuela. "Global Feminism and Trauma in Elena Ferrante's Saga *My Brilliant Friend*." *MLN*, vol. 136, no. 1, 2021, pp. 32–53. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2021.0003>.
- Caputi, Mary. "'The Known Footsteps of My Mother': The Power of the Abyss in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." *Theory & Event*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2020, pp. 641–63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2020.0038>.
- Casillo, Robert. *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Dickie, John. *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780312299521>.
- Favero, Paolo. "Italians, the 'Good People': Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War." *Outlines: Critical Practice Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2010, pp. 138–53. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ocps.v12i2.2370>.
- Ferrante, Elena. *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*. Translated by Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, 2016.
- . *My Brilliant Friend*. 2012. Translated by Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, 2020.
- . *The Story of a New Name*. 2013. Translated by Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, 2020.
- . *The Story of the Lost Child*. 2015. Translated by Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, 2020.

———. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. 2014. Translated by Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, 2020.

Foot, John. *Modern Italy*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Giorgio, Adalgisa. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. Berghahn Books, 2002.

Glynn, Ruth. *Naples and the Nation: Image, Media and Culture in the Second Republic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-80158-7>.

———. "Porosity and Its Discontents: Approaching Naples in Critical Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 107, 2020, pp. 63–98. <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.107.2020.0063>.

Gramsci, Antonio. *The Southern Question*. Translated by Pasquale Verdicchio, Guernica Editions, 2005.

Hooper, John. *The Italians*. Penguin Random House, 2015.

Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text*, no. 15, 1986, pp. 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>.

Milkova, Stiliana. "Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics: Ekphrasis in *Troubling Love*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Story of a New Name*." *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 159–82. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57580-7>.

Patriarca, Silvana. *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Piras, Romano. "A Long-Run Analysis of Push and Pull Factors of Internal Migration in Italy: Estimation of a Gravity Model with Human Capital Using Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Approaches." *Papers in Regional Science*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2017, pp. 571–603. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12211>.

Recio Ruíz, Elena. "A Limping Mother and a Witch-Whore: Monstrous Maternities in Elena Ferrante's *The Neapolitan Quartet*." *Esferas Literarias*, no. 7, 2024, pp. 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.21071/elrl.i7.17393>.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Virago, 1977.

Robinson, David. "Italian Orientals." *Midlands Historical Review*, vol. 2, 2018, www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/italian-orientals/.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1978. Penguin Books, 2003.

Schneider, Jane. "Introduction: The Dynamics of Neo-Orientalism in Italy (1848–1995)."

Italy's 'Southern Question': Orientalism in One Country, edited by Jane Schneider, Routledge, 2020.

SVIMEZ. *Un paese, due emigrazioni*. 2026.

Thorpe, Christopher. *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Routledge, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429019920>.

Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin. "Unspeakable Things Spoken: Transgenerational Trauma, Fractured Bodies and Visual Tropes in Toni Morrison, Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante's Works." *Romance Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2023, pp. 248–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2024.2311516>.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Catholic Ritual and the Grotesque Moral of Trouble(d) Bodies: The Role of the Stomach, Digestion, and Bodily Experience in Bernard MacLaverty's <i>Cal</i> (1983)
Author	Danielle Blee
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Catholic Ritual and the Grotesque Moral of Trouble(d) Bodies: The Role of the Stomach, Digestion, and Bodily Experience in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983)

Danielle Blee

The University of Glasgow

This paper explores the stomach as a central site of moral and historical trauma in Bernard MacLaverty's Cal. Specifically, this will highlight the organ's history of hunger within the Irish canon through an analysis of Catholic iconography. In doing so, this paper considers the Great Famine, the 1981 Hunger Strikes at the Maze Prison complex, and religious fasting in repentance for sins. Hunger is considered within the context of Ireland's colonial past, both as a forced bodily trauma and as a method of colonial resistance against the British administration which once attempted to starve its body politic. Within the novel, the stomach acts as a somatic vessel for sin and salvation; it is a signifier of Cal's internal guilt and the rigid political and moral absolutism of his environment. Undoubtedly, the stomach plays a vital role within the novel, with this essay considering how the organ is represented both biblically and politically. This paper understands this correlation through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque bodily realism, viewing the stomach and other bodily functions – such as digestion and sex – as socially and culturally productive in Irish Troubles fiction. In essence, this paper examines Ireland itself as a body, with Catholicism as its stomach, processing and digesting the violent trauma of its colonial past and present.

Ireland's vast literary body starves and consumes, digests and excretes. This process arises from a history of constant dualities – between Protestantism and Catholicism, or war and peace. While Bernard MacLaverty claimed that his 1983 novel *Cal* is “more about Catholicism than it is about the Troubles”, the work remains a vital entry in the Irish Troubles genre (“Glasgow, in Interview”).¹ But, while the religious tension in MacLaverty's work is widely accepted, analysis of the Trouble(d), starving body remains underdeveloped: this is the critical gap this paper attempts to remedy. If Ireland is a body, then Catholicism is its stomach. In *Cal*, the organ serves as the site of Catholic liturgical redemption and suffering, historically emptied to advance the national cause. MacLaverty explores this tension by utilising what he

¹ On Redemptive Suffering and Catholic symbolism in *Cal*, see Davis, 81-95 and Mahon, 71-104.

describes as “the mental furniture” of Irish identity by fusing the liturgical symbolism of the Eucharist with modern nationalistic rhetoric and by mapping Ireland's history of moralised self-sacrifice directly onto his protagonist's physical suffering (“An Interview”). The religiopolitical tensions of Trouble(d) Ireland certainly established such a framework of sacrifice, providing both the soldiers for a civil war and the moral justification for violence to redress historical wrongs. Ultimately, applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque bodily realism reveals how the stomach, digestive tract, and sexual organs reimagine traditional Catholic concepts of sin, sacrifice, and suffering as distorted and visceral realities within the context of the civil war. By tracking how this imagery of suffering was mapped onto the starved Irish body, this paper uncovers an explicit cultural ancestry of hunger-haunted literature.

In Irish folklore, the *Fear Gorta* (“Man of Hunger”) is an apparition that takes the form of an emaciated man, begging for alms or food. Appearing during times of famine, he is both a harbinger of starvation and a mythological reflection of the historical trauma plaguing the Irish psyche.² Elsewhere is the *Féar Gortach* (“Hungry Grass”): cursed patches of land, where a wrong step can cause an insatiable, fatal hunger. Thus, the metaphorical stomach, as both a site of power imbalance and political resistance, has a long history in Irish culture.³ Before this paper can analyse the entwined imagery of Catholicism and the stomach within MacLaverty’s *Cal*, it is vital to reconsider the political, cultural, and economic history of what I call ‘Ireland’s empty stomach’. This paper will consider the cataclysmic effects of *An Gorta Mór* (“The Great Potato Famine”) and the 1981 Hunger Strikes on the Irish psyche, establishing hunger as a historically significant ailment to the Irish body politic. Namely, the Famine resulted in a demographic collapse, with Brian Donnelly arguing that it was “the most significant and far-reaching event” in modern Irish history (260). The Famine’s impact is best measured by the visceral void it left behind. To elaborate on Donnelly’s point, Ireland’s population was recorded as around 8.2 million but fell dramatically in the Famine’s aftermath, with around one million dying and over two million emigrating, according to the 1841 census (Carney 36). The suffering was exacerbated by a British colonial administration that, as Joel Mokyr argues, “simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish” (292). By exporting grain

² See W.B. Yeats’ “The Solitary Faeries” in *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry*, 81.

³ See Joseph Lennon’s “Dreams That Hunger Makes: Memories of Hunger in Yeats, Mangan, Speranza, and Irish Folklore”, 62-81.

while the Irish starved, the colonial system transformed the act (or lack) of ingestion into a systemic weapon, imprinting a lasting disdain for the British administration among the Irish.⁴ This devastation of populace, culture, and language seized the Irish literary imagination, with arguably Ireland's most famous writer, James Joyce, grappling with its sociopolitical aftermath. As Bonnie Roos emphasises, "trying to read *Ulysses* without reference to the Irish potato famine is to miss this all important key" (160).⁵ The Famine codified the stomach as the central site of the Irish experience, as it appears consistently throughout its history and literature. The stomach (and the act of digestion) became an integral tool of resistance, specifically during the 1981 Hunger Strikes, as it sought to draw power from the very colonial system that attempted to starve it.

Hunger pains continued to hit Ireland's stomach during its Trouble(d) period of civil war, from the late 1960s until 1998. Specifically, the 1981 Hunger Strikes, at the heart of the Troubles, followed a tradition of 'willing' starvation and martyrdom. This is a sentiment that appears throughout MacLaverty's *Cal*, in which he depicts a body politic at war with its own anatomy, one which voluntarily purges itself to resist British colonial power.

The concept of a willing hunger first emerged in 1920, following the death of Sinn Féin leader Terence McSwiney; it resurfaced during the 1981 Hunger Strikes at the Maze Prison. As a political tool of resistance, hunger striking became a defining act of "self-immolative martyrdom" against British policy (Sweeney, "Self-Immolative Martyrdom" 337). Initiated in response to the removal of Special Category Status, the protest cycle moved from the blanket protests of 1976 to the dirty protests of 1978, before culminating in the 1981 Hunger Strikes. These strikes specifically mirrored Irish revolutionary history, with the seven original strikers chosen to represent the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, affirming their service "in the name of God and of the dead generations" (Pearse). Most famously, Bobby Sands collapsed the British narrative of criminality associated with the strikers when he was elected as MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 1981. One month after his election, Sands would die from a hunger strike, martyring himself at the height of his political legitimacy. As Paul Howard argues, Sands' election "brought down the shaky edifice

⁴ See Dean M Braa's "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society", 193–215.

⁵ On the Irish Potato Famine in Joyce, see Julieann Ulin's "'Famished Ghosts': Famine Memory in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", 20–63; and Robert Merritt's "Faith and Betrayal: The Potato in *Ulysses*", 269–276.

of British security policy in Northern Ireland, one based on the hypothesis that the conflict was caused by a small rump of criminals who enjoyed no community support" (70). For the Irish psyche, hunger was an effective form of protest, a religiopolitical experience which fused physical starvation with the metaphysical pursuit of martyrdom amidst the era's religiopolitical tensions. These strikes were deeply entwined with Catholic rhetoric, as evidenced by Sands' own diary: "I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul". Hunger, framed by the Troubles, canonised the Irish political leader. By attaching theological martyrdom to the nationalist pantheon, the stomach became a site where the political rebel was transformed into a sacred figure.

This concept of ritual self-sacrifice began a "special value in the development of Irish-Christian traditions, particularly so if it was linked to or offered up to God in unison with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Christ" (Sweeney, "Irish Hunger" 422). In Catholic doctrine, the suffering of the body is intrinsically linked to the gratification of the soul – a sentiment which permeates *Cal*. Here, suffering and self-sacrifice are 'offered up' in exchange for redemption: for example, as noted by Cal, his mother "did everything she should do ... if what she wanted was spiritual she denied her body" (MacLavery, *Cal* 111). Again, MacLavery reinforces this through the iconography of Irish ascetic Matt Talbot, who "turn[ed] pain and sorrow into a gift for God" (*Cal* 111). The Irish literary body is defined by this fraught relationship with consumption. Central to the nationalist symbology of British wrongdoing, Ireland's history of starvation is essential to understanding the stomach as a site of both spiritual penance and political resistance. In this colonial context, whereby the individual is stripped of political, civic, and social liberties, the body becomes central in the arsenal of resistance. In choosing to starve voluntarily, the protestor reclaims sovereignty over their own flesh. This delivers the historical ghost of the famine, the *Fear Gorta* (a sombre, passive image of the suffering Irish peasant) to transform it into an aggressive, active agent of political resistance. In this way, the willing, spiritual hunger of the striker becomes an act of indictment against the British state, reclaiming power from an enforced historical legacy.

If the Great Famine established the stomach as the primary site of colonial suffering, MacLavery reimagines the organ as the locus of ecclesiastical and moral strain. The tension Cal experiences is not merely a byproduct of hunger but a somatic manifestation of guilt for his participation in Robert Morton's murder. For Cal, the stomach is the ultimate signifier of

his revulsion toward violence; his admission that he has “no stomach for it” elevates the organ to the role of the physical body’s conscience (MacLavery, *Cal* 19). Within this framework, the self-mortification of the flesh evolves into a tradition of Irish-Catholic expression, most visible in the ritualistic consumption of the Eucharist. As the Catechism asserts, “the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice” (1367). This sacred ingestion represents a grotesque mode of self-mortification; the stomach becomes the site of transubstantiation, where “the whole substance of bread and wine” is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ (*La Santa Sede*). As Mikhail Bakhtin emphasises in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), such rituals reflect a “phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth” (24). To fully understand how this transformation operates, one must look to the etymology of the word ‘grotesque’. According to the *OED*, the term originally alluded to a “kind of painting or sculpture consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms” discovered in the subterranean grottos of ancient Roman chambers. By definition, then, the grotesque is entwined with the shameful, buried, or hidden. This etymological link directly connects the grotto to the corresponding liminal spaces of the grave and the womb – both of which emphasise the dissolution of the body’s borders (as widely debated in grotesque criticism).⁶

Taking this into consideration, MacLavery’s *Cal* occupies a liminal space of grotesque spirituality in which life and death are inseparable. At the beginning of the novel, Cal witnesses a literal dying birth, as calves in the abattoir are slaughtered with cheesewire during labour. The calves “get born in bits”, with their fragmented bodies representing the physical manifestation of the grotesque’s cycle of destruction and renewal (MacLavery, *Cal* 142). Correspondingly, the Memorial Acclamation, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”, codifies this duality within the Catholic imagination, framing the body as a site of perpetual, fragmented rebirth. Cal’s depiction of a dying birth, alongside the liturgical acclamation, echoes the Bakhtinian duality of life and death, a cycle driven entirely by the renewing engine of the stomach. In *Cal*, the corporeal experience of the stomach becomes fundamental to the Catholic literary imagination: it is a visceral signifier of both moral calamity and grotesque transformation amidst the violence of the Troubles. While the crucifixion is often studied for its experience of bodily trauma and destruction, consuming the

⁶ See Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque*, particularly ‘Introduction’, ‘Chapter 1’, and ‘Chapter 2’, 2-73.

Eucharist presents an overlooked opportunity to consider a linguistic and physical rebirthing through the stomach.⁷ Consequently, the body of both Christ and the believer form what Bakhtin coins the “double body”, where the “life of one body is born from the death of the preceding” (318). The stomach’s symbolic power as a site of ‘rebirth’ demonstrates its fundamental centrality to Catholic liturgy:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’. (Matthew 26:26-28)

The stomach serves as the liturgical pivot of the Catholic Church, where the consumption of the Eucharist transforms redemption into a literal, corporeal experience. Much like the calves “born in bits” at the abattoir, Christ is rebirthed after the crucifixion as the Host – a fragmented body to be consumed and digested by the faithful. This visceral transformation underpins the “mental furniture” of the Catholic experience MacLavery invokes as he reimagines the Eucharist as a symbol of the consumed and consuming double body.

Thus, the stomach serves as a cyclical metaphor throughout *Cal*, symbolising the internalised violence and trauma embedded within the Northern Irish psyche. By opening the novel at an abattoir, MacLavery immediately grounds the Northern Irish body in a site of slaughter and consumption, signalling a focus on an idiosyncratic body politic: “he stood at the back of the abattoir ... his stomach rigid with the ache of want” (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). Here, MacLavery reconceptualises the Irish stomach by repurposing the historical culture of hunger into a modern, nervous condition. Cal’s “rigid” and “tightened” frame stands in direct contrast to that of the Preacher, whose “strong stomach” allows him to digest the violence that leaves Cal in a state of increasing physical tension (MacLavery, *Cal* 1-11). Consequently, the Preacher has long been an allegorical focal point for critics reading the religious contentions of the Troubles.⁸ Described as “an anaemic with a strong stomach”, he requires

⁷ See Frank Senn’s *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual*, particularly Chapter 5 ‘Sacrifices and Meals’, 119-148.

⁸ On The Preacher, see Peter Mahon’s “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”, 77-104.

the sustenance of sacrificial blood from the abattoir's butchered cattle to maintain his health (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). MacLavery links this consumption to Easter Rising leader Pádraig Pearse's infamous lamentation that the "heart of Ireland would be refreshed by the red wine of the battlefields" (*Cal* 75). As Peter Mahon observes, the Preacher preys upon these "sacrificial dynamics": his "Adam's apple of a vulture" bridges the grotesque and theological (74). By consuming the blood of the butchered, the Preacher embodies a death culture that sustains itself on the very people it purports to save.

Expanding upon Mahon's reading, one must consider the theological and anatomical history of the Adam's apple to explore how the Preacher serves as a grotesque signifier of inherited guilt. Per Thomas Bartholinus' *Anatomy*, this protrusion represents the fatal apple lodged in the throat of man – a permanent physical reminder of original sin (123). This focus on the throat, the gateway to the stomach, reinforces the Bakhtinian notion of a body that "swallows the world and is itself swallowed" (317). Consequently, the Preacher becomes a personification of an Ireland sustained by the ritual consumption of its own sinful history, transforming a political critique into a deeper theological exploration of the Troubles. Through this imagery of the gullet, MacLavery captures the static nature of the conflict: like the biblical apple stuck in the throat, the original sin of Northern Irish history can neither be digested nor expunged. Joyce tackles a similar physical stasis in *Ulysses*, famously declaring that "history [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (42). This line exemplifies a distinct Irish preoccupation with paralysis, where the physical body remains static amidst historical turbulence and violence, or as Cal laments, "caught between the jaws of two opposing ideals" (MacLavery, *Cal* 86). Often, the martyr's body sits at the centre of this historical paralysis. This is the pantheon culture that MacLavery interrogates through the Preacher. Amidst these religiopolitical tensions, Irish martyrdom became a methodised, liturgical practice. As Radford points out, Pearse "joined the calendar of patriotic martyrdom which he had elevated through word and deed to the stature of an *Imitatio Christi*, finally embodying the whole Irish people" (280). To expand upon Radford's point, there is an overtly grotesque edge to this liturgical martyrdom: by calling for "the red wine of the battlefields", Pearse not only invokes the blood of Christ, but positions himself as a figure who paradoxically consumes the very people he claims to embody. MacLavery posits that this alignment of theological martyrdom and political violence is the root cause of Ireland's historical sleep

paralysis. Consequently, the Preacher, in drinking the sacrificial blood of the warring populace, becomes a perversion of Eucharistic practice. In this act, the Northern Irish body is literally and metaphorically crucified and processed through the Bakhtinian act of becoming, solely to sustain the national ideal. By attaching the Eucharistic cycle of sacrifice and resurrection to the stomach, MacLavery exposes the cannibalistic brutality of the ethnoreligious civil war.

In a Bakhtinian reading, consumption and excrement become essential in a life, death, and rebirth cycle. Bakhtin posits that in the dichotomy of death and rebirth, excrement holds a special status; in *Cal*, where both the body of Ireland and Cal are constantly “eating and defecating”, this encourages a rich textual exploration (MacLavery 19). These bodily elements are deeply positive because they link the individual directly to their environment through a process of renewal. Within this framework, Cal’s nervous stomach (churning with guilt and Catholic rejection) serves as the novel’s somatic centre. As Richard Russell argues, MacLavery utilises “Catholic faith and practice” to drive the narrative’s deeper meaning (28). Cal must be viewed as a central by-product of Ireland’s religiopolitical digestive tract; he is the “Merde. Crotte de chien. Merderer” that the nation consumes and subsequently excretes (MacLavery, *Cal* 9).⁹ Undoubtedly, scatological metaphor is central to MacLavery’s critique of both Catholicism and sectarian violence. He utilises his ‘low’ imagery to externalise Cal’s guilt for the murder of Robert Morton. This scatological focus finds a theological precedent in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus addresses the Pharisees’ preoccupation with ritual purity: “do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (Matt. 15.17–18 qtd. in Czachesz 97). As István Czachesz posits, while faecal matter may trigger disgust, it is not inherently “ritually unclean” (97). This distinction is vital to a Bakhtinian reading. If Ireland is a body that consumes its populace through Eucharistic ritual, then Cal represents the by-product of that consumption. He is the material rendered unproductive to the nationalist cause, the literal and metaphorical excrement of the Irish body politic. But crucially, however, the Bakhtinian grotesque finds a site of positive renewal

⁹ “Merde” from French, “shit”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/merde>. “Crotte de chien” from French, “dog dirt”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/une-crotte-de-chien>.

in scatological metaphor. Throughout the novel, Cal attempts to rid himself of the sectarian rhetoric of violence and nationhood. Through this allegorical digestion of trauma, MacLavery presents excretion as an act of resistance against a personified Ireland. The “image of excrement” plays a “special role in overcoming fear”, serving as the “intermediate between earth and body” (Bakhtin 175). For Cal, phrases such as “crotte de chein” and “dirty vache”¹⁰ linger like “indigestion”, signalling a somatic rejection of the body politic (MacLavery, *Cal* 4). By utilising this scatological metaphor, MacLavery clarifies his stance on the dogmatic nationalist institutions; Cal effectively transcends the Eucharist, replacing the sanitised image of Jesus’ sacrificial body with the raw reality of his own expunged trauma. Ultimately, Cal’s scatological metaphor facilitates a positive transgression against the Trouble(d) status quo. He finds a strange sanctuary in the shelter of the cowshed, with “the reek of the cattle much more acceptable than the smell of the abattoir [...] the dung smell that hung around them was not unpleasant” (MacLavery, *Cal* 69). In this shift, MacLavery establishes a preference for the living, processing body over the slaughtered one. By embracing the positive connotations of excrement, Cal solidifies his role within the grotesque cycle of renewal. He emerges as a distinctive Northern Irish grotesque Jesus, a figure whose identification with bodily waste ensures his metaphoric resurrection: he rises not from the tomb, but from the digestive tract and subsequent waste of Ireland’s violent history.

Undoubtedly, Cal’s attempts at penance and self-mortification align his suffering with Christ’s destroyed body. MacLavery integrates the imagery of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1512-1516) into the narrative as a pictorial delineation of rebirth through trauma. Painted for a hospital church specialising in the treatment of *ignis sacer* (St. Anthony’s Fire), the altarpiece presented a Christ whose body mirrored the patients’ own decay. As Uta Henning and Marry Rasmusen explain,

[i]t was the duty of Antonite houses to care for the sick, especially those beset by the ignis sacer, St Anthony's fire, the source of which was ergot poisoning (caused by eating cereals affected by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*) and which usually ended up in

¹⁰ “Vache” from French, “cow”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/vache>.

decaying limbs. These had to be severed from the body ... (marks of the disease are painted in various panels of the Isenheim altarpiece.) Before a patient was admitted to the Antonite house at Isenheim, he was led to Grünewald's altarpiece ... thus becoming motivated to accept his suffering as Jesus Christ did. (667)

By leading patients to this image, the Atonites encouraged the sick to internalise their agony as a mirror of Christ's own suffering. This interconnection of the stomach, decaying flesh, and spiritual atonement provides a visceral template for both the Catholic liturgy and the nationalist rhetoric of blood sacrifice that Cal is forced to navigate. Indeed, this image of the broken or suffering body saturates the Northern Irish novel: as Kai Erikson argues, "the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body [...] traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos [and] a group culture" (185). Grünewald's altarpiece embodies this communal trauma, bridging the physical agony of the Isenheim patients with the renewing spiritual energy of Christ's sacrifice. The altarpiece embraces the material reality of this suffering; Grünewald integrates the domestic and the divine by depicting "a bed, a glass jug, a *chamber pot* and a wooden tub" alongside the Madonna (Henning and Rasmusen 667, emphasis added). This inclusion of the chamber pot reinforces the Bakhtinian cycle of life and death, where the by-products of digestion, the excremental results of spiritual and physical consumption, are foregrounded as essential to the experience of both the Isenheim patients and MacLaverty's *Cal*. MacLaverty ensures that Cal's physical body, specifically the stomach, remains the primary site of his trauma: "he rubbed his stomach and belched quietly. Nerves gave him wind" (*Cal* 89). This digestive distress serves as a somatic manifestation of the guilt that Lanta Davis identifies as "resembling the suffering of Christ" (88). This penance is literalised when Cal wears the murdered Morton's "y-fronts" and "carries the mesh frame of the bed ... on his bowed back" (MacLaverty, *Cal* 104). This imagery invites a dual reading of the crucifixion: Morton's underwear functions as a perizoma, mirroring the ragged loincloth depicted in Grünewald's altarpiece. As a grotesque Jesus figure, Cal offers up his suffering, not for a divine cause, but as a visceral atonement for Marcella, the woman whose husband he helped to murder.

As this paper has emphasised, Cal's digestive tract and bodily functions serve as the somatic centre of the Irish body politic. However, in line with the Bakhtinian lower bodily stratum, shifting the focus to reproductive and sexual organs reveals how Cal's self-

mortification operates through the Eucharistic lens. Cal's attempts at atonement manifest a "sexualised penance" (Shumaker 9). This penance entwines sexual hunger with the physical stomach; as previously noted, Cal's stomach is rigid "with the ache of *want*" (MacLavery, *Cal* 1; emphasis added). This sexualised penance expresses itself through his relationship with Marcella, Robert Morton's widow. While critics such as Mahon focus on the "maternal Madonna" aspect of Marcella, this paper goes further, arguing that her sexual anatomy, as well as the act of sex itself, becomes a metaphorical altar at which the liturgic Catholic mass is performed (104). Marcella's sexual organs, more specifically her womb, become the metaphorical Tabernacle hosting the Eucharist. Within Cal's own grotesque imagination, Marcella is not merely a mother figure, but the living Altar; his desire for her becomes a ritualistic attempt to find sanctuary within the very worship he otherwise rejects. Cal wishes to "share his guilt, to commune with [Marcella]" and be forgiven for his sins as a communicant of both her body and spirit (MacLavery, *Cal* 151-152). Indeed, the sacrament of confession within the Catholic doctrine permits the absolution of sin, yet MacLavery grounds this spiritual release in the physical architecture of the body. In *Cal*, the Eucharist becomes central to the exploration of Trouble(d) bodies, with Cal emerging as a grotesque version of the crucified Christ offered up within the sanctuary of Marcella's body. MacLavery emphasises the grotesque notion of death and rebirth as intertwined with sex and the lower bodily stratum. When Cal and Marcella have sex, the "flesh of Christ spotted and torn, bubonic almost" is juxtaposed against the "smoothness of Marcella's body" (MacLavery, *Cal* 165): this moment represents a crucial transition from the stomach to the womb. While the novel begins with Cal's stomach "rigid with the ache of want", a site of acidic guilt and the digestive violence of the state, his union with Marcella offers a ritualistic shelter (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). Drawing on Henri de Lubac's argument, the narrative positions the Church's altar, personified by Marcella, as the site of an "anomalous return to the womb", receiving the sinner into a space of new life (69). While the womb is central to the cycles of life and death in grotesque analysis, it remains underdeveloped in the Bakhtinian canon; Mary Russo addresses this gap in *The Female Grotesque* (1994) by re-establishing the regenerative power of the female body within grotesque criticism. She anchors this in etymology, linking the grotto (the root of grotesque) to the cave, or the "cavernous anatomical female body" (Russo 1). In *Cal*, MacLavery constructs a corporeal Catholic altar by mapping liturgical significance onto active sexual anatomy. This carnal sanctity stands in direct contrast to the classical Madonna, whose

body is “transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, [and] symmetrical” (Russo 8). Ultimately, MacLavery recasts the classical, static religious icon as a site of sexual movement – a grotesque altar through which worship facilitates renewal and regeneration. The conception of the Church thus becomes paradoxically feminised; the destructive digestive tract of the Northern Irish body politic, which seeks to swallow and excrete Cal as a “merderer”, is momentarily halted by the creative potential of the womb (MacLavery, *Cal* 9). In Marcella’s bed, the “bits” of the butchered calves and the torn flesh of Grünewald’s Christ are gathered back into a temporary wholeness, reimagining the act of sex as a restorative, albeit grotesque, Eucharist to be consumed and digested.

Cal, therefore, possesses an inherently digestive quality. The novel’s Eucharistic references are far from accidental, opening with the sacrificial body and blood of the abattoir as a grotesque inversion of Catholic doctrine. In this way, Cal and the body of Ireland emerge as a Bakhtinian “double body”, where the proximity of life and death becomes a cosmic attempt to transcend the sectarian violence of the Troubles. As Bakhtin posits, “the soul’s beatitude is deeply immersed in the body’s lowest stratum” (378). Thus, the somatic experience, centralised in the mouth, stomach, womb, and anus, becomes inextricably entwined with Christian liturgy. Cal functions as a grotesque Jesus, offering a sexualised, masochistic penance to Marcella that conflates spiritual death with physical rebirth. By seeking refuge on the Morton farm, Cal finds a shelter that is perpetually overshadowed by the trauma of this past. In MacLavery’s vision however, the stomach remains the final arbiter of truth; Cal’s redemption is not found in the clean rhetoric of the state, but in the messy, digestive reality of a body that must suffer in order to be reborn.

Works Cited

- Allman, Mark. "Eucharist, Ritual & Narrative: Formation of Individual and Communal Moral Character". *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2000, pp. 60–68.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1965. Translated by Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Braa, Dean M. "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society". *Science & Society*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1997, pp. 193–215.
- Carney, F. J. "Pre-Famine Irish Population: The Evidence from the Trinity College Estates". *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. 2, 1975, pp. 35–45.
- "Catechism of the Catholic Church". Catholic Culture.org,
<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=4230>
- Czachesz, István. *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse: Hell, Scatology, and Metamorphosis*. Routledge, 2012.
- Davis, Lanta. "Redemptive Suffering in the Isenheim Altarpiece and Bernard MacLaverty's Cal". *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 81-95.
- De Lubac, Henri. *The Motherhood of the Church*. Translated by O.C.D.Sr Sergia Englund, Ignatius Press, 1982.
- Donnelly, Brian. "The Great Famine and the Literary Imagination". *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 69, no. 275/276, 1980, pp. 260–72.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community". *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathay Caruth, John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- The Gospel According to Matthew*. Authorised King James Version, Grove Press, 1999.
- Griffith, Benjamin. "Ireland's Ironies, Grim and Droll: The Fiction of Bernard MacLaverty". *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 106, no. 2, 1998, pp. 334–38.
- "Grotesque, n. & adj., etymology". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2241918312>.
- Henning, Uta, and Marry Rasmusen. "Grünwald's Isenheim Altarpiece". *Early Music*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2001, pp. 667–69.
- Howard, Paul. "The Long Kesh Hunger Strikers: 25 Years Later". *Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 4 (106), 2006, pp. 69–91.
- Lennon, Joseph. "Dreams That Hunger Makes: Memories of Hunger in Yeats, Mangan, Speranza, and Irish Folklore". *Irish University Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2017, pp. 62–81.

- MacLavery, Bernard. *Cal*. Vintage, 1983.
- . “Bernard MacLavery, Glasgow, In Interview”. Interview by Christian J. Ganter, *Anglistik*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1996, p. 13.
- . “An Interview with Bernard MacLavery”. Interview by Russell Richard, *Irish Literary Supplement*, 2006, p. 22.
- Mahon, Peter. “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”. *ELH*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71–104.
- Merritt, Robert. “Faith and Betrayal: The Potato in ‘Ulysses.’” *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1990, pp. 269–76.
- Mokyr, Joel. *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*. Taylor & Francis, 2013.
- Pearse, Padraic. *The Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916*. Dolmen Press, 1975.
- Radford, F. L. “King, Pope, and Hero-Martyr: *Ulysses* and the Nightmare of Irish History”. *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1978, pp. 275–323.
- Roos, Bonnie. “Feast, Famine and the Humble Potato in *Ulysses*”. *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*. Irish Academic Press, 2006.
- Russell, Richard. “Parabolic Plots in Bernard MacLavery’s *Lamb*”. *Bernard MacLavery: New Critical Readings*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque*. Routledge, 1994.
- Sands, Robert. “Prison Diary”. *Bobby Sands Trust*, <https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/writings/prison-diary/>
- Senn, Frank C. *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual*. Augsburg Fortress, 2016.
- Shumaker, Jeanette. “Rivalry, Confession, and Healing in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”. *Notes on Modern Irish Literature*, vol. 9, 1997, p. 9.
- Sweeney, George. “Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice”. *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1993, pp. 421–37.
- . “Self-Immolative Martyrdom: Explaining the Irish Hungerstrike Tradition”. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 93, no. 371, 2004, pp. 337–48.
- Thomas, Bartholin. *Bartholinus Anatomy*. P. Cole, 1662.
- Tuama, Padraig O. *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community*. Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2017.

Ulin, Julieann. "'Famished Ghosts': Famine Memory in James Joyce's *Ulysses*". *Joyce Studies Annual*, 2011, pp. 20–63.

"La Santa Sede". *Vatican.va*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/it.html>.

Yeats, William Butler. *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry*. Walter Scott Publishing, 1890.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Hierarchies of Flesh: Racialised Embodiment on the Thai-Burma Railway in Richard Flanagan's <i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i> (2013)
Author	Sarah Kenchington
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Hierarchies of Flesh: Racialised Embodiment on the Thai-Burma Railway in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013)

Sarah Kenchington

University of Edinburgh

*This article reads *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) through the lens of the racialised body, arguing that the labouring on the Thai-Burma railway exposes the unequal valuation of human life under empire. Whilst the novel is often understood as a meditation on white Australian suffering, masculinity, and memory, its most unsettling insight lies in its attention to those who are already marked as marginal within their respective societies before the war begins. Focusing on Darky Gardiner, an Indigenous Australian soldier, and Choi Sang-min, a Korean conscript in the Japanese army, this article traces how the railway intensifies pre-existing hierarchies, rendering certain bodies especially vulnerable to violence and erasure. Through a close reading of Darky's brutal beating and death, this article explores how the body becomes the primary site upon which imperial power is exercised. Darky's destruction is not exceptional but continuous with the racial logics that precede the camp. Choi Sang-min's violence, however, reflects the unstable position of the colonised subject compelled to perform authority through brutality – in many ways, their interactions can be framed as the ultimate violence of colonisation. In foregrounding these intersecting trajectories, the novel reveals war not as simply a rupture, but as an intensification of the structures that render some lives less visible and, ultimately, seen as less human.*

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) follows Dorrigo Evans, an Australian army doctor and prisoner of war, across the Second World War and its aftermath. The novel centres on Dorrigo's experiences as a prisoner on the Thai-Burma Railway, while its narrative also shifts between his wartime captivity and later life in Australia. Constructed by the Japanese Empire between 1942 and 1943 using forced labour (including that of Allied prisoners of war), the railway brings together soldiers whose experiences of empire are markedly different. Among them are Darky Gardiner, an Indigenous Australian soldier serving in the Australian army, and Choi Sang-min, a Korean conscript serving in the Japanese military. Their eventual confrontation provides the central focus of this article because it brings two histories of colonial subordination into direct contact: Darky serves a settler-colonial nation

that continues to marginalise Indigenous Australians, while Choi exercises military authority within an empire that has colonised his own country.

Recent scholarship has begun to move beyond framing the novel in terms of the ANZAC tradition, masculinity, and psychological consequences of war, instead situating it within the intersecting imperialist histories of the nations represented by Flanagan. Ben Holgate, for example, argues that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* reveals the unstable relationships between British, Australian, and Japanese empires, where Dorrigo “fights in a series of foreign battles effectively on behalf of his country’s former colonizer, Britain”, exposing the complex relationship between Britain and Australia whilst Japanese expansion transforms the regional balance of power (1). Meanwhile, Susan Strehle identifies Darky Gardiner as the novel’s ethical centre and “as Flanagan’s hero”, emphasising his commitment to communal responsibility under extreme conditions (81). Daniel McKay’s discussion of Korean characters in prisoner-of-war narratives is particularly useful for understanding Choi Sang-min, whose position within the Japanese military is complicated by Korea’s status as a Japanese colony (53-54). Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that the novel cannot be understood solely through a national account of Australian wartime experience. My intervention is to bring these approaches into closer relation through the question of embodiment: what happens when these intersecting histories of empire are experienced through bodies, and how does the novel represent racial hierarchy through physical vulnerability, violence, and memory?

In this article, I use the term ‘racial hierarchy’ to describe the unequal distribution of authority, recognition, vulnerability, and social value according to racialised identities within imperial and settler-colonial systems. The concept is particularly important to the novel because its characters do not enter the railway as socially equivalent subjects who are subsequently divided by wartime circumstances. They carry with them different histories of racialisation and colonial power. John Kane’s account of white Australian racialism is useful here: he observes that white Australians conceived of themselves as belonging to a superior British “race” endowed with qualities considered absent or less developed in other racial groups (122). David Pearson similarly situates Australia within the history of the settler-nation state, emphasising the continuing significance of the ethnic foundations upon which that state was established (7). These arguments provide a historical context for reading Darky’s

position within the Australian military, where formal participation in national service does not erase the racial inequalities attached to Indigenous identity.

This article approaches these intersecting histories of empire through the question of embodiment. Postcolonial theory draws attention to the ways colonial power structures social relations and assigns unequal value to racialised subjects. In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, these hierarchies become particularly visible through the body: through military rank and uniform, physical labour, punishment, injury, and death. Embodiment therefore provides a way of tracing how structures of imperial and settler-colonial power become lived experiences. Darky's position as an Indigenous Australian soldier exposes the contradiction between military service and the continuing inequalities of settler colonialism, while Choi's position as a Korean conscript reveals the subordinate position of a colonised subject within the Japanese military. Reading the two characters together allows this article to examine how these different histories of colonial power meet through the body.

Trauma theory extends this focus from the immediate experience of violence to its aftermath. Irene Visser's account of postcolonial trauma is particularly relevant because it places trauma within the longer history of colonial oppression, while Michael Rothberg's work complicates fixed distinctions between victims and perpetrators. These approaches are important for understanding Choi, whose participation in violence against Darky occurs within a system that also subjects him to racial and imperial domination. Visser and Rothberg also inform this article's final discussion of Dorrigo's memory of Darky, where the effects of violence persist after the body itself has disappeared. Trauma, then, is not a separate theoretical concern, but a means of considering what happens to embodied violence after the moment of its infliction.

The novel's historical setting of the railway makes these questions particularly visible. Forced labour brought together soldiers positioned differently within the competing imperial systems of the Asia-Pacific. White Australian prisoners entered captivity as members of a British settler society whose racial assumptions shaped their relationships with Indigenous Australians. Therefore, as an Indigenous Australian, Darky has the complexity of serving a nation that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples while still demanding their military service. Similarly, Choi occupies another contradictory position. As a Korean conscript, he exercises authority within the Japanese military while remaining a subject of the empire that had

annexed Korea in 1910. The railway therefore provides the setting in which these distinct histories of colonial power come into contact, with the beating and death of Darky being the central example through which the novel makes that convergence bodily visible.

This article consequently focuses on three connected processes: the production of racial hierarchy before captivity, its inscription upon the body through Darky's beating, and its persistence after death through the instability of memory. The first section establishes the different colonial histories carried by Darky and Choi into the camp, showing why their apparent similarity as marginalised soldiers should not obscure the differences between Indigenous dispossession in Australia and Korean subordination within the Japanese Empire. The second examines Darky's beating as the point at which these histories converge, asking how the camp transforms pre-existing racial inequalities into physical violence and how Choi becomes implicated in that violence. The final section considers Dorrigio's inability to remember Darky's face, extending the analysis from bodily injury to historical remembrance. I argue that Flanagan's representation of these characters reveals imperial power as something lived through bodies and relationships; colonial hierarchies determine not only who is vulnerable to violence, but also how that violence is subsequently remembered.

Racialised Bodies Before the Camp

Darky Gardiner's position within the prisoner community is defined by a tension between the authority he acquires through his actions and the limited recognition afforded to him by the institutions around him. As the only Indigenous Australian among the central group of prisoners, Darky enters the railway carrying a racial history that is not erased by military service. Strehle identifies him as the novel's ethical centre, describing his commitment to "communal values that protect human lives under extreme duress" (81). The significance of this ethical authority becomes clearer in the contrast between how Darky is valued by his fellow prisoners and how he is positioned within the structures of military power. He is trusted because he takes responsibility for others, yet his institutional status does not grant him equivalent authority. The novel thus places two forms of value alongside one another: the communal authority Darky earns through care and the formal authority attached to military rank and racial status.

The tension between Darky's communal authority and his institutional position appears through small material details. Before the prisoners are captured, Dorrigo notices that "Darky Gardiner's kitbag seemed only half the size of anyone else's" (Flanagan 35). This detail draws attention to Darky's physical position within a group that otherwise appears to share the same military identity. Although the men wear the same uniform and belong to the same army, their material circumstances are not identical. The undersized kitbag therefore becomes an early indication that military participation does not necessarily produce equality among the soldiers. Darky's body is already marked by difference before the Japanese camp imposes its own racial and military hierarchies, making his later treatment part of a longer history rather than an entirely new experience of inequality.

The novel develops upon Darky's moral authority most clearly through his response to conditions which encourage resignation and self-preservation. He is described as someone who "was always looking for the good thing, no matter how small, and consequently he often found it" (178). The repeated emphasis on his ability to locate something positive within deprivation distinguishes his outlook from the fatalism that increasingly characterises life on the railway. Darky's optimism is not presented as ignorance of suffering; he understands the brutality of the camp but continues to direct his attention towards the people around him. His willingness to share food, assist other prisoners, and support the sick gives his optimism a practical rather than merely psychological dimension. What makes Darky an ethical figure, then, is not simply that he remains hopeful under pressure; but that his response to suffering takes the form of responsibility towards others.

The contrast between Darky's ethical authority and his institutional status becomes particularly clear when he assists Dorrigo in moving medical supplies into the medical tents. Colonel Rexroth calls him "a thief", with Dorrigo countering that "The Black Prince helps me save lives" (47). The opposing descriptions attach different meanings to the same action. Rexroth understands Darky's behaviour through military discipline and the ownership of supplies, while Dorrigo interprets it through the practical demands of keeping men alive. The exchange therefore distinguishes formal authority from the authority Darky acquires through care. Yet Dorrigo's recognition of Darky's value does not alter the institutional hierarchy within which he operates. Darky can be respected by individual prisoners while remaining vulnerable to forms of authority that do not recognise the ethical legitimacy of his actions.

This distinction becomes more significant when Darcy's representation is read alongside Indigenous scholarship on the continuing structures of Australian colonialism. Walter, Kukutai, Henry, and Gonzales argue that analyses of Australian society must recognise its "colonizing foundations", warning that ignoring those foundations produces a "blinkered analysis" of contemporary social relations (9). Their intervention is useful here because Darcy's military service might otherwise be read as evidence that the national community has temporarily overcome the racial divisions of settler society. The novel instead keeps his Indigenous identity significant alongside his status as a soldier. His participation in the Australian military does not remove the colonial history that structures his position within it. Darcy can therefore be incorporated into a national narrative of military service without becoming fully equal within the society that narrative represents.

Choi Sang-min occupies a different but related position within the structures of empire. As a Korean serving in the Japanese military, he exercises authority over the Australian prisoners while remaining subordinate within the imperial system itself. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, after which time Korean political and cultural autonomy was progressively suppressed (Lissington 13). McKay describes Korea under Japanese rule as a colonial "possession" (45); a formulation that is particularly useful for understanding the contradiction at the centre of Choi's position. His military uniform gives him authority over the prisoners, but it does not make him an equal member of the Japanese imperial nation. He is both an agent of imperial power and a subject of that power.

Darcy and Choi therefore occupy comparable but non-equivalent positions within their respective imperial systems. Darcy is an Indigenous Australian serving a settler-colonial nation whose institutions have historically marginalised Indigenous people; Choi is a Korean serving the empire that has colonised his homeland. Their positions should not be collapsed into a single category of colonial victimhood. What connects them is the conditional nature of their authority: neither man is fully equal within the institution whose uniform he wears. The railway brings these different forms of subordination into contact, creating the conditions in which one colonised subject can be made to exercise violence against another. Choi's role in Darcy's beating is therefore not simply a reversal of victim and perpetrator. It is the point at which two different histories of racial and imperial power intersect.

These different histories become materially consequential once the prisoners enter the camp. Darky arrives with a form of authority grounded in communal responsibility but marked by the racial inequalities of Australian society. Choi arrives with formal authority that remains conditional upon his position within the Japanese imperial hierarchy. Their relationship makes visible a central tension of the novel: the camp brings differently positioned subjects together without erasing the histories that have produced their unequal status. The beating of Darky is where that tension becomes physical.

The Beating: Empire Inscribed on Flesh

Darky Gardiner's beating transforms the racial and institutional inequalities established earlier in the novel into bodily violence. Its significance lies partly in the chain of responsibility that precedes it: Darky is punished for the actions of white Australian prisoners who have already challenged his authority before the Japanese guards intervene. The scene therefore brings different structures of power into the same physical encounter. Darky's position within the Australian work party, Japanese military discipline, and Choi Sang-min's subordinate role within that hierarchy all contribute to a punishment ultimately inflicted upon Darky's body. The beating makes embodiment central to the novel's representation of empire because inequalities of authority become consequences of injury, vulnerability, and physical degradation.

The conflict begins when several Australian prisoners, led by Rooster MacNeice, avoid their assigned labour. Darky responds by reminding them, "But you blokes are in my gang today", before asking, "How's it fair on the other blokes?" (Flanagan 254, 255). His choice of words is important. Rather than invoking his rank or demanding obedience, Darky frames the problem through its effect on the other prisoners. The question of what is "fair" turns leadership into a collective obligation: if some men avoid work, others must carry an additional burden. This understanding of authority develops the ethic of care established earlier through Darky's assistance to Dorrigio. His leadership derives from responsibility towards the group rather than the assertion of power over it.

Rooster's response exposes the fragility of this authority. Assuming that Darky will conceal the men's absence, he tells Darky, "You'll cover for us" (255). When Darky refuses,

Rooster dismisses him as “too weak a sergeant to ever say anything” and “Not a leader like the old leaders” (256). The accusation is revealing because Darky has just demonstrated leadership by insisting upon responsibility to the group. Rooster nevertheless interprets his refusal to exercise authority through intimidation as evidence of weakness. His appeal to “the old leaders” places Darky against an established model of military authority associated elsewhere in the novel with figures such as Colonel Rexroth. Read alongside Darky’s position as the only Indigenous Australian within the central prisoner group, this exchange raises a question about whose authority is readily recognised within the supposedly common structure of military service. Darky possesses rank and exercises responsibility, but neither guarantees that the men under his command will recognise him as a legitimate leader. Shared captivity consequently does not produce social equality among the Australian prisoners. The military camp reorganises the men’s circumstances, but it does not erase the assumptions through which authority was recognised before imprisonment. Rooster’s rejection of Darky is significant precisely because it occurs among men whose dependence upon one another might otherwise appear to suspend such distinctions.

The injustice becomes explicit when Darky is punished “for a crime he had not committed” (238). Responsibility for the absent workers is transferred onto the person charged with supervising them, so that the earlier challenge to Darky’s authority produces consequences for his body rather than for the men who refused to work. The phrasing matters because it separates culpability from punishment; Darky does not suffer because the narrative has established his guilt, but because his position makes him responsible for the actions of others. Once the beating begins, this institutional vulnerability becomes physical. His face assumes “a strange look of astonishment each time the guards hit him with their fists or bamboo poles” (284). “Astonishment” recalls the ethical outlook established earlier in the novel. Darky has repeatedly understood survival through fairness and responsibility towards others; the arbitrary violence inflicted upon him operates according to a radically different logic. His expression registers the collision between these two systems of value on the body itself.

The physical transformation of Darky during the beating shows how violence strips away the forms of recognition through which he has previously been understood by the other prisoners. Choi beats him “with a bamboo pole as thick as his arm, as if the prisoner were a particularly filthy carpet”, and by the end of the assault Darky “no longer looked like a man,

but something wrong and unnatural" (285, 295). The comparison with a "filthy carpet" reduces the human body to an object that can be struck repeatedly without reciprocal recognition or obligation. The adjective "filthy" intensifies this degradation by making the object appear to require punishment or cleansing. By the later description, even Darky's recognisable human form has been altered to the extent that he no longer "looked like a man". This sequence gives material form to the unequal valuation of bodies as Darky moves from being a soldier whose authority is contested to a body upon which violence can be repeatedly enacted.

Darky's Indigenous identity gives this bodily degradation a further significance within the novel's Australian context. Although the violence is inflicted by Japanese and Korean members of the camp hierarchy, its victim has already been positioned differently from the white Australian prisoners through references to settler-colonial history. The scene should not, however, be read as making Japanese imperial violence equivalent to the violence of Australian settler colonialism; the histories and forms of domination are distinct. Instead, Darky's beating places an Indigenous Australian body at the point where different imperial structures meet. His vulnerability in the camp consequently cannot be separated from the unequal position he occupies within the Australian society for which he serves.

The consequences of the beating continue after the guards stop striking Darky, extending imperial violence beyond the immediate moment of punishment. When he later leaves the hospital tent, he finds himself "swimming in shit ... If he closed his eyes he was back there being beaten. If he opened his eyes he was drowning in shit" (296). The repetition of "shit" collapses bodily degradation and traumatic recollection into the same experience. Darky moves between the physical reality of the latrine and the remembered sensation of the assault, so that closing his eyes offers no escape from what has happened to his body. By the following morning, he is discovered "floating head-down", apparently having fallen into the latrine without sufficient strength to pull himself out (297). The precise circumstances of his death remain uncertain, but its relationship to the beating does not: the assault has left him physically incapable of saving himself.

The beating changes the terms of the article's argument. The racial and imperial hierarchies established before the camp are no longer visible only through differences of status or authority; they have become consequences for the body. Darky's contested

leadership contributes to the circumstances in which he is punished, Japanese officers determine the form that punishment will take, and Choi Sang-min is required to enact it. Choi's participation, however, introduces a further complication. The person who physically inflicts much of the violence is himself a colonial subject whose authority within the Japanese military remains conditional. Understanding the beating therefore requires attention not only to Darky's vulnerability, but to the position of the man ordered to strike him.

Choi Sang-min and the Victim/Perpetrator Divide

Choi Sang-min complicates the ethics of Darky's beating because his role cannot be contained entirely within either the category of perpetrator or victim. He is responsible for inflicting severe violence upon Darky and must remain accountable for that participation, yet at the same time, his authority is exercised from a subordinate position within the Japanese imperial hierarchy. The distinction matters because recognising Choi's own colonial subjection does not make his suffering equivalent to Darky's or diminish the violence he enacts. Instead, his position exposes the uneven distribution of agency within imperial systems, in which a subject can exercise coercive power over others while remaining vulnerable to coercion from above.

Choi is first complicated through the discrepancy between the Australian prisoners' perception of him and the narrative's attention to his responses to suffering. The prisoners nickname him the Goanna and imagine that he might be "the devil himself", identifying him through monstrosity before the novel has fully established his position within the camp (Flanagan 184). Yet during the punishment of Tiny Middleton, Choi is described as "stunned", and "With Darky, he looked on in amazement" (184). The shared "amazement" of Choi and Darky creates an unexpected correspondence between men positioned on opposite sides of the camp hierarchy. Choi remains the person inflicting violence upon Tiny, so the moment does not make his position equivalent to Darky's, but it does reveal a gap between the monstrous identity the prisoners attribute to Choi and the emotional response the narrative allows him to display. His capacity to be disturbed by another man's suffering complicates the assumption that his brutality expresses an uncomplicated or innate cruelty.

The relationship between Darky and Choi is further complicated by moments of pragmatic cooperation. Their exchange of smuggled goods establishes a relationship based on mutual usefulness rather than friendship, allowing negotiation to coexist with the violence of military occupation. This distinction is important: the two men do not occupy equal positions, nor does their cooperation dissolve the hierarchy separating guard from prisoner. It nevertheless creates a form of recognition between them that later makes Darky's beating more troubling. Choi knows Darky as an individual with whom he can conduct "good business", rather than solely as an interchangeable Australian prisoner (282). The violence he later inflicts therefore occurs against a prior relationship in which Darky has already acquired a particular identity for him.

The limits of that recognition become clear during the inspection of the prisoners' sleeping quarters. Darky believes he has folded his blanket according to "the regulation Imperial Japanese Army Fashion", but Choi interprets the result as mockery (198). He throws the blanket into the mud, strikes Darky with his rifle and kicks him after he falls, leaving him "confused", bleeding, and covered in "foul mud" (199). Jimmy Bigelow later explains that "The Goanna thought you was taking the piss" (200). The explanation does not excuse Choi's violence, but it changes its significance. His response is triggered by a perceived challenge to his authority, suggesting that his position within the camp is sufficiently insecure for an apparently minor mistake to be interpreted as humiliation. The episode therefore reveals how violence can become a means of defending authority that Choi himself does not securely possess.

McKay's account of Korean service within the Japanese Empire provides an important context for this insecurity. Korean soldiers could occupy positions of military authority without possessing equivalent political status within the imperial order, leaving their "dignity and freedom" constrained by colonial rule (McKay 53). Strehle consequently describes Choi as both "villain and victim" (98). The formulation is useful, but only if the two terms are not allowed to cancel one another out. Choi is a "villain" in the immediate sense that Darky experiences him: he beats prisoners and later participates directly in Darky's death. His status as a "victim" belongs to a different relationship of power, that between Choi and the Japanese Empire. Reading the categories together therefore reveals not moral equivalence but

hierarchy: Choi can be subordinated by Japanese authority while simultaneously exercising destructive authority over Darky.

Choi's insecurity derives from the fact that the authority he exercises over prisoners is not matched by recognition from the Japanese officers above him. Colonel Kota regards him as "untrustworthy and unreliable", interpreting even attempts at deference as possible contempt or mockery (Flanagan 281). The imbalance becomes physical when Kota, frustrated by his own failed attempt to behead a prisoner, finds "the Korean sergeant whose name he could never remember" and strikes him repeatedly (282). The forgotten name is particularly revealing. Choi can enforce Japanese military discipline, but the institution he serves does not grant him equivalent individuality or respect. His authority is therefore conditional: he is sufficiently empowered to punish prisoners while remaining sufficiently subordinate to be punished himself.

This hierarchy changes the significance of Choi's role in Darky's public punishment. When ordered to retrieve him, Choi considers the accusation "even more pointless than most" and remembers that the two have always conducted "good business" (282). He assumes that after the punishment "Gardiner would still need him and he Gardiner", revealing that he does not anticipate the violence destroying their relationship altogether (283). Yet his private reservations do not become refusal. Choi instead reflects, "You could go to war with the world, but the world would always win. What could he do?" (283). The question articulates a form of learned powerlessness; Choi understands the hierarchy surrounding him as something against which resistance cannot succeed. His obedience is therefore neither evidence of complete freedom nor evidence that he lacks agency altogether. He acts within conditions that make compliance the strategy through which he has learned to survive.

Choi's position illustrates the instability of the victim/perpetrator distinction identified earlier in relation to trauma theory. Visser's insistence that trauma studies account for "colonialism's systemic oppression" is useful because Choi's actions take place within a structure of domination that has already constrained his political and racial position (276). Rothberg's warning that the categories of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' should be understood as "abstractions" that exist within "contexts of injustice [which] are multiple and often contradictory" further clarifies why acknowledging Choi's subordination need not diminish his responsibility for Darky's suffering (8). He occupies different ethical positions within

different relationships of power: victimised by the imperial structure above him, he becomes a perpetrator in relation to the prisoner below. The significance of this contradiction lies precisely in its asymmetry. Choi's own subordination does not make Darky less of a victim; it reveals how imperial hierarchy can transmit violence through people whom it has already subordinated.

The phrase "on the monster's face, a monster's mask" gives this divided position a visual form during Darky's beating (285). "Monster" recalls the Australian prisoners' earlier construction of the Goanna as "the devil himself", but "mask" complicates the apparent identification between Choi and monstrosity. A mask is worn and distinguishes the role being performed from the person beneath it. The image does not make Choi's actions less brutal, nor does it establish a hidden innocence behind them. Instead, it suggests a tension between the violent role Choi performs within the Japanese military and an identity that cannot be completely reduced to that role. When Dorrigo orders him to stop and Choi ignores him, the hierarchy governing that performance becomes clear. Dorrigo may command the Australian prisoners, but Choi is answerable to Japanese authority.

The conditional nature of Choi's authority becomes unmistakable when Nakamura notices that he is "putting less force into his blows" against Darky (291). Nakamura responds with the contemptuous judgement, "Koreans. Useless Koreans. No wonder they didn't use them as front-line troops", converting Choi's apparent hesitation into evidence of racial inferiority (288). He then turns physical violence upon Choi himself, striking him before ordering the beating to continue. The sequence places Choi between two forms of bodily violence: he inflicts punishment upon Darky while being disciplined by Nakamura for failing to inflict it with sufficient force. His hesitation does not amount to refusal, but it reveals that the violence demanded of him is not performed without friction. Japanese authority responds to that friction by reminding Choi, through both racist language and physical assault, of the subordinate position from which he exercises power.

Choi's role in the beating consequently changes how responsibility operates within the novel without dissolving it. Darky remains the victim of a punishment that destroys his body; Choi remains one of the men who inflicts that punishment. What complicates the relationship is the assumption that perpetration necessarily originates in secure or autonomous power. Choi exercises violence from within a hierarchy that also racialises, disciplines, and physically

assaults him. The beating therefore brings two central forms of embodiment into the same scene: Darky's body bears the destructive consequences of imperial hierarchy while Choi's body is disciplined into continuing its violence. Yet the consequences of Darky's destruction do not end with his death. They persist in the novel's later concern with whether his body—and the life attached to it—can continue to be remembered.

Death and the Erased Body

Darky's death shifts the novel's treatment of embodiment from physical destruction to the problem of remembrance. The beating has reduced his body to an object of violence and what remains of Darky after death depends not only upon the survival of his body, which has already been destroyed, but upon the ability of others to remember him. In the novel's later chronology, Dorrigo confronts a different form of loss as his memory of Darky becomes increasingly unstable. Dorrigo's memory of Darky is marked first by shame rather than coherent recollection. After an uncomfortable interview with a journalist, he finds that "something about the journalist had reminded him of Darky Gardiner", provoking "a strange shame" (20). The association unsettles the moral confidence upon which his public identity has come to depend. Dorrigo reflects that he has increasingly relied upon the assumption that "what he said was right, and what was right was what he said", before conceding that "Perhaps, since that day of Darky's beating, he had been sure of nothing" (19, 20). Darky's memory therefore functions less as a consoling remembrance than as a disturbance. Recalling him returns Dorrigo to an event that continues to challenge the certainty with which he understands both himself and the past.

The instability of Dorrigo's remembrance becomes more troubling when he admits, "I can't remember his [Darky's] face" (15). The loss is striking because Dorrigo continues to remember Darky's ethical significance while becoming unable to recover his physical appearance. The distinction between remembering what Darky represented and remembering Darky himself matters for this article's concern with embodiment. His body has already been destroyed in the camp; decades later, even its image is becoming inaccessible to one of the men who knew him most closely. The novel thus places bodily destruction and

imperfect remembrance alongside one another, asking what remains of a person when the material body is gone and memory can preserve only fragments.

Dorrigo's inability to recover Darky's face also allows the novel's private act of forgetting to acquire a broader historical resonance. Darky is not simply a dead prisoner but an Indigenous Australian soldier whose place within the national story is already complicated by the settler-colonial history examined earlier in this article. His fading physical presence in Dorriggo's memory therefore raises the possibility that participation in national history does not guarantee equivalent visibility within its remembrance. The point is not that Dorriggo's imperfect memory can stand straightforwardly for Australian collective memory. Rather, the novel uses his failure to remember Darky fully to place pressure upon the relationship between wartime commemoration and the people such narratives risk leaving indistinct.

The movement from the beaten body to the fading face develops an additional dimension of embodiment. Darky's physical destruction is complete, but his disappearance is not; the novel also makes his continued visibility dependent upon an unstable act of remembrance. Dorriggo can retain the moral disturbance associated with Darky while losing the bodily image of the man himself. The afterlife of violence is therefore registered not through another physical assault but through the incompleteness of memory.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* represents imperial power most clearly through its effects upon racialised bodies. Reading Darky Gardiner and Choi Sang-min alongside one another reveals how the Thai-Burma Railway brings distinct histories of settler colonialism and Japanese imperialism into direct contact without making those histories equivalent. Darky enters the camp as an Indigenous Australian soldier whose military service does not erase the inequalities of the society for which he fights; Choi enters it as a Korean conscript who exercises authority within the military structure of the empire that has colonised his homeland. Their encounter makes visible the different forms of conditional authority and vulnerability produced by these imperial systems.

Darky's beating provides the clearest material expression of this argument. His authority is first challenged by Australian prisoners, before Japanese military discipline transforms that institutional vulnerability into bodily punishment. The progression from contested leadership to physical degradation demonstrates how racial and imperial hierarchies acquire material consequences. Darky's body becomes the point at which different structures of power converge, while the language of the beating progressively strips him of the recognition attached to his identity as soldier, leader, and individual.

Choi's participation complicates this process without diminishing his responsibility for Darky's suffering. His position within the Japanese military shows that perpetration does not necessarily originate in secure or autonomous power. Choi inflicts violence upon Darky while remaining racially subordinate to Japanese officers who distrust, insult, and physically discipline him. The relationship between the two men therefore unsettles fixed categories of victim and perpetrator while preserving their asymmetry. Darky is the victim of the beating, and Choi is one of its perpetrators, but Choi's participation occurs within an imperial hierarchy that also subjects him to coercion. This distinction is central because it shows how colonial power can be transmitted through subjects who themselves occupy subordinate positions.

The novel's concern with embodiment continues beyond Darky's physical death. Dorrigo's later inability to remember Darky's face extends the problem of bodily disappearance into the instability of memory. Darky remains morally significant to Dorrigo, yet the physical image of the man is increasingly inaccessible. The movement from the beaten body to the fading face demonstrates that the consequences of violence persist not only through injury but through the incomplete ways in which lives are subsequently remembered. For an Indigenous Australian soldier, that fading visibility also places pressure upon the relationship between national wartime memory and the subjects such narratives may fail to preserve fully.

By bringing postcolonial approaches to embodiment into conversation with trauma theory, this article extends existing criticism of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* beyond questions of Australian identity and wartime remembrance alone. Its focus on Darky and Choi shows how imperial structures become legible through the body: through the recognition or refusal of authority, through physical punishment, through coerced participation in violence, and through the instability of remembrance after death. The novel's representation of empire

consequently emerges through these embodied and unequal relationships, in which differently racialised subjects are brought together by war while remaining marked by the colonial histories that precede and outlast it.

Works Cited

- Flanagan, Richard. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. 2013. Vintage, 2015.
- Holgate, Ben. "Intersecting Imperialisms: The Rise and Fall of Empires in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*." *Journal of World Literature*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2019, pp. 437-57.
- Kane, John. "Racialism and Democracy: The Legacy of White Australia." *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, edited by Geoffrey Stokes, Cambridge UP, 1997, pp. 117-31.
- Lissington, M. P. *New Zealand and Japan 1900-1941*. A. R. Shearer Government Printer, 1972.
- McKay, Daniel. "Guarded Truths: Korean Characters in POW Narratives and POW Narratives in Korean History." *Studia Neophilologica*, vol. 90, no. 1, 2018, pp. 44-55.
- Peason, David. *The Politics of Ethnicity in Settler States: States of Unease*. Palgrave, 2001.
- Rothberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford UP, 2019.
- Strehle, Susan. "War and Communities of Suffering: Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*." *Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 77-102.
- Visser, Irene. "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2011, pp. 270-82.
- Walter, Maggie, et al. "Introduction: Holding the Discipline of Sociology to Account." *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous Sociology*, edited by Maggie Walter et al., Oxford UP, 2021, pp. 1-11.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	A Nonhuman Too Human: Posthuman Embodiment in Jonathan Glazer's <i>Under the Skin</i> (2013)
Author	Yufeng Li
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

A Nonhuman Too Human: Posthuman Embodiment in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013)

Yufeng Li
University of Edinburgh

*In cinematic characterisation, the human body has traditionally been conceived as a biological constant – the primary locus of identity and the key distinction between human and nonhuman entities – reflecting a long-standing anthropocentric belief. However, under the growing influence of posthumanism challenging anthropocentrism, contemporary cinema has begun to articulate forms of posthuman embodiment that destabilise historically constructed boundaries between human and nonhuman by depicting hybrid modes of being. Nevertheless, the persistence of anthropocentric paradigms, alongside the fundamentally human-driven nature of filmmaking, imposes structural limitations on such posthumanist inquiries in cinema, rendering them inescapably “too human”. Accordingly, this article uses Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013) as a case study to examine its effective depiction of posthuman embodiment within a posthumanist framework. In particular, it focuses on the film’s deployment of the metaphor of “skin” and “unskin” to visualise a nonhuman entity inhabiting and leaving a human body, thereby challenging conventional anthropocentric models of embodiment. This article also offers a critical view of the film’s limitations, arguing that its cinematic articulation of posthuman embodiment remains constrained by an over-reliance on existing humanistic frameworks. Both its visual emphasis on sexualised femininity and its conceptual reinforcement of gender binaries reveal a persistent tendency to remain “too human”.*

In films featuring both human and nonhuman characters, the human body has conventionally been viewed as a biological constant, functioning as the primary source of identity and the pivotal marker distinguishing human beings from nonhuman entities. This reflects an established anthropocentric assumption in cinematic characterisation, often manifested through stereotypical visual designs of nonhuman characters that deliberately emphasise their difference from the human body. For example, Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016) features intelligent extraterrestrial beings known as “heptapods”. However, the film constructs these aliens through a set of oppositional visual cues, such as seven asymmetrical limbs as well as dark, indistinct and nonorganic skin textures that contrast sharply with

familiar human morphology (fig. 1). This design strategy reinforces a conventional anthropocentric framework, within which nonhuman entities are rendered intelligible primarily through their deviation from normative human embodiment. In this context, films frequently construct nonhuman forms in deliberate opposition to human physiognomy, thereby positioning the human as the principal referent of intelligibility. Such representations reflect an anthropocentric worldview in which humans are the central entity in the universe,¹ which systematically correlates with other species being accorded lesser significance (Boslaugh).



Fig. 1, A heptapod confronts a human, 2016.

Nevertheless, with the growing influence of posthumanism in the twenty-first century, traditional anthropocentric frameworks in narrative are increasingly being challenged. According to Michaela Fenske and Martha Norkunas, narratives in the twenty-first century progressively position humans not as dominant agents, but as participants within an entangled and interconnected world; in this posthuman paradigm, humans develop the

¹ This is the definition of “Anthropocentrism” from *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Boslaugh).

capacity to coexist with both other humans and nonhuman entities. Consequently, established conceptual boundaries like nature and culture, civilisation and wilderness, as well as humans and nonhumans, are being reconfigured (107). This shift is reflected in an increasing number of films depicting a posthuman embodiment that questions conventional anthropocentric models of human embodiment and blurs the boundary between human and nonhuman. Among such films, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) provides a compelling example of how posthuman embodiment within a posthumanist framework can be visualised through cinematic language, particularly by foregrounding the human body as a symbolic site of meaning. Specifically, the film mobilises the metaphor of "skin" and "unskin" to depict a nonhuman entity inhabiting and leaving a human body, thereby challenging conventional anthropocentric models of embodiment. As Missy Molloy et al. suggest, *Under the Skin* compellingly engages with posthumanism by provocatively destabilising the boundaries between human and nonhuman materiality (110). But although this film offers an effective depiction of posthuman embodiment, its cinematic articulation of this condition remains constrained by an over-reliance on existing humanistic frameworks. While the film initially introduces a hybrid figure across the human-nonhuman boundary, it ultimately shifts to a humanistic narrative where the nonhuman attempts to become human. As a result, the film's exploration of posthumanism is inconsistent, with two key factors that limit its cinematic representation of posthuman embodiment. At a visual level, the excessive focus on Scarlett Johansson's femininity and her stardom as a sex symbol undermines the film's posthuman vision. At a conceptual depth, the film's reiteration of gender stereotypes and the male-female binary reveals an inherent limitation of posthumanism itself: its tendency to remain "too human". As Rosi Braidotti notes, posthumanism seeks to critique humanism, but its critique is still grounded in humanistic frameworks ("Posthuman, All Too Human" 197–208).² Recognising both potentials and limitations of the posthumanist approach raises a further question about what posthuman embodiment might entail: is there an evolutionary or progressivist trajectory toward such

² For Braidotti, posthumanism does not seek to reject the humanist tradition outright. For instance, in her examination of Haraway's notion of the cyborg, Braidotti argues that "this philosophical post-humanism does not, therefore, result in anti-foundationalism. It rather stresses the need for process ontology" (199). Braidotti also highlights that posthumanist discourses should not be understood as abstract ideas detached from human experience. Instead, they possess tangible political implications. As she points out that "the function of figurations such as the cyborg or the companion species is not abstract but, rather, political" (200).

forms of existence, and would they remain intrinsically human? This question will be explored through the following posthumanist analysis of the film *Under the Skin*.

Posthumanism: Beyond the Human, Yet Still Too Human

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the film, a brief examination of the relevant posthumanist theories is required. Posthumanism is a relatively recent theoretical paradigm, but it has already attracted significant attention within contemporary scholarship. According to Francesca Ferrando, posthumanism emerges in response to twenty-first-century developments in cybernetics and biotechnology that fundamentally challenge traditional conceptions of the human body and identity.³ As technologies transform the human body and reshape understandings of what it means to be “human” as a biological species, they prompt a posthuman reconsideration of the ontological and epistemological foundations of humanity (Ferrando and Braidotti 21). In this sense, posthumanism seeks to think beyond the human by transcending the traditional binary divisions that have structured humanist thought. In cinematic representations, this tendency is often manifested in the visualisation of hybrid posthuman figures that dissolve the boundaries between humans and nonhumans, notably through the imagery of the cyborg.⁴ One iconic conceptualisation of this form of boundary transgression is Donna Jeanne Haraway’s notion of the cyborg in her 1985 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto”, in which she argues that “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (67). For Haraway, the cyborg destabilises rigid oppositions between body and machine, human and nonhuman, as well as identity and category, demonstrating that these boundaries are neither fixed nor impermeable (67–68).

³ Ferrando presents the following examples of the developments concerning the advancements associated with the redefinition of the human body: “On the one side, electronic pacemakers, high-tech prostheses, and plastic surgery have become accepted practices of body reconfiguration. On the other, in a pioneer experimentation toward technological enhancement, a growing number of people have implanted RFIDs under their skin” (21).

⁴ Cyborg, a term combining “cybernetic” and “organism”, was first introduced in 1960 to describe a human whose physiological functions are enhanced by artificial means, such as biochemical or electronic modifications (Clynes and Kline 27). However, within a broader context of posthumanism, it can function as a philosophical metaphor transcending binary oppositions.

Still, posthumanism itself remains “too human”: it is after all a theoretical framework developed by humans, and it therefore cannot entirely escape the ontological and epistemological assumptions of human thought. This constitutes a major critique of posthumanism, exemplified by Paul James, who points out that while proponents of the posthumanist approach aim to tackle significant issues caused by humanity and humanism, a fundamental problem is that their critique often either reproduces the very conditions it seeks to challenge or devolves into disclaimers that create internal contradictions (31). Posthumanists also recognise this dilemma, as reflected in Braidotti’s argument of “posthuman, all-too-human”: “our posthuman times, with their large inhuman component, are all too human” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 9). In essence, posthumanism is “too human” as it is inherently constrained by the human perspectives of the posthumanists who formulate it. The key issues addressed by posthumanism, such as the impact of technological advancement on social structure and the growing environmental problems caused by humans, are, fundamentally, human concerns. Posthumanists seek to address these problems, but their efforts eventually stay directed toward human interests rather than those of nonhumans (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 20–22).

Such a paradox of seeking to move beyond the human while remaining confined by human perspectives is reflected in posthumanist discourse in contemporary cinema, as exemplified by *Under the Skin*. This dilemma of being “beyond the human, yet still too human” is manifested through the limited scope of cinematic posthuman embodiment. Such representations frequently visualise hybrid human-nonhuman forms that resonate with Haraway’s conception of the cyborg as a figure that transcends traditional human binary divisions, namely gender binaries (65–66). At the same time, they often get constrained by human thought patterns, privileging the genuine human embodiment over nonhuman modes of existence. For Molloy et al., this tendency reflects a fundamentally conservative stance towards both gender and nonhuman embodiment (121).

Admittedly, being “too human” has been a significant challenge within posthumanism studies, but it does not constitute a theoretical obstacle requiring immediate resolution, nor is there a simple solution to the issue. The critique of human nature from a posthumanist perspective does not entail a complete rejection of everything that is considered human. As Ferrando suggests, posthumanism is not completely against humanity and it is aware of the impossibility to eliminate the hierarchical and humanistic presumptions of humans (32).

According to Jennifer Cotter et al., posthumanism morally rejects the “arrogance” of humanism and its assertion of an awareness regarding the destructive methods of humanist “intentionality” (3). Posthumanism critiques anthropocentrism for overemphasising humans while neglecting nonhuman agents. This does not entail ignoring humans, but calls for a more inclusive viewpoint that acknowledges the significance of nonhuman entities. Moreover, an excessive preoccupation with eliminating the influence of human subjectivity is impractical, as in the current situation, the thinkers, practitioners and even the critics of posthumanism are themselves human. Ultimately, posthumanism cannot fully transcend the limitations of the human mindset, but offers an approach that moves beyond traditional human-centred methods.

Breaking Stereotypes: A Nonhuman under a Human Skin

Under the Skin is written by Glazer and Walter Campbell, based on the 2000 eponymous novel by Michel Faber. This film stars the American actress Scarlett Johansson as an alien disguised as a woman. Its plot revolves around a group of sapient aliens who hunt local single human males in Scotland for unknown purposes. Those aliens cover their bodies with human skins to hide their identities and one of them (Scarlett Johansson) poses as a human female (fig. 2). This alien woman⁵ lures men to the aliens’ hideout where they are killed and skinned. Initially heartless, she gradually develops human emotions during her hunts. After escaping from her alien partners, she attempts to assimilate into the society of humans, but struggles with digesting human food and becomes fearful of having sex with a man (Michael Moreland) who invites her to his home. In the end, the alien woman is caught by a human logger (Dave Acton) who attempts to rape her and her human skin gets torn apart during the fight, revealing her black nonhuman body. After that, the frightened logger burns her alive, putting an end to her endeavour to become human.

⁵ In *Under the Skin*, there is no evidence that the aliens have a sex determination system. Nevertheless, I still describe the alien protagonist according to its human skin as “alien woman” in later sections to avoid any confusion, except in particular situations, such as the following footnote, where I find it more suitable to use the pronoun “it” rather than “her”.



Fig. 2, *The alien woman in her human skin*, 2013.

The nonhuman character design in *Under the Skin* challenges the stereotypical portrayal of alien creatures in films, such as *Arrival*, which tend to envisage the extraterrestrials by deliberately adding visual elements opposite to humans. This film avoids intentionally emphasising the visual difference between humans and nonhumans, instead presenting a nonhuman character under a human skin. In *Under the Skin*, human skin functions as a conceptual boundary between humans and nonhumans, operating as a metaphor for a traditional anthropocentric logic in which the body is positioned as the primary locus of identity and the key marker of distinction between species. However, the film destabilises this assumption by reconfiguring skin not as a fixed biological constant, but as a flexible and mutable interface. Accordingly, the boundary between human and nonhuman is no longer presented as stable or essential, but as permeable and variable. According to Molloy et al., this represents a type of “cinematic use of women cyborgs”, enabling us to explore posthuman embodiment and examine the ambiguous materiality that emerges from the erosion of humanism’s rigid separation between humans and nonhumans (109).

In *Under the Skin*, acquiring human skin represents “becoming human”, while losing it leads to dehumanisation. There are two key plot points in the film portraying the process of “unskinning”, symbolising the procedure of dehumanisation. The first scene is when a

human victim gets everything under his skin “vaporised”, leaving just his skin; the second is near the end of this film, when the alien woman gets her human skin ripped apart by a logger trying to rape her. Both scenes are about dehumanisation, but from different perspectives. The first one is about a man losing everything except his human skin, while the second is about a nonhuman losing only its⁶ human skin. Therefore, in relation to the acquisition or loss of the human skin, *Under the Skin* raises two critical questions about the definition of human in posthumanism: what is human, and what is the difference between humans and nonhumans?

Many films address the two questions vaguely, often reflecting the issue at a relatively superficial level: the human body, typically represented as human skin, determines what is human and distinguishes humans and nonhumans. A considerable number of such films differentiate between human and nonhuman characters primarily on the basis of outward appearance, specifically, whether or not they possess a human body, while neglecting what is ostensibly contained within that body. In these cases, nonhuman characters, despite lacking a human body, are rendered as human beneath their nonhuman exterior. Their subjectivity remains fundamentally anthropomorphic, as they exhibit behaviours, cognitive patterns, and emotional responses closely aligned with those of humans. This tendency is evident in the alien “E.T.” in Steven Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), who behaves like a human baby, thinks like a human child and displays an unconditional friendship with humans. Some other films, such as *Arrival*, challenge these anthropomorphic stereotypes by assigning nonhuman cognitive and behavioural patterns to the aliens, but still fail to break the stereotypical alien character design visually. This underscores how the stereotypical design of nonhuman characters tends either to anthropomorphise their traits or to overemphasise visible markers of nonhuman embodiment, while neglecting a substantive articulation of their intrinsic nonhuman qualities.

On the contrary, *Under the Skin* engages these questions in a comparatively more rigorous manner, disrupting the stereotypical cinematic characterisation of nonhumans by foregrounding and critically interrogating the apparent opposition between human and nonhuman embodiment. It visualises a form of posthuman embodiment predicated on a

⁶ In this specific context, I believe it is more appropriate to use the pronoun “it” for the alien protagonist to emphasise the intrinsic nonhuman quality of this extraterrestrial being, which exists independently of and does not depend on its acquired human skin.

hybrid condition that traverses and destabilises the boundary between humans and nonhumans. The human body does not define what it means to be human. Rather, being human encompasses much more than just the outer layer of the body; it goes under the skin. Like in Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), people are substituted by alien replicas, each serving as a flawless biological copy of the original person, yet lacking the essence of humanity. In *Under the Skin*, this idea is illustrated in the death scene of the human victim, where the human essence once beneath the skin is stripped away, leaving behind empty skin that symbolises dehumanisation. Furthermore, in this film, the difference between humans and nonhumans is not in the human body but in what lies inside this body. In the film, the aliens disguise themselves as humans and deceive almost every human they come across by successfully concealing their true identities under human skin. But despite their ability to blend in, they are fundamentally nonhumans due to their lack of humanity. Their disregard for human life and human ethics is consistently noticeable throughout the film. For William Brown, this film effectively depicts a nonhuman character whose behaviours, ethics, values, and modes of perception are fundamentally distinct from those of humans, in part by offering a nonhuman perspective on humanity itself: "*Under the Skin* offers us an intriguing look at how an alien might view our world – in a detached, curious fashion, as in one scene when the alien allows humans to drown at sea and a baby to be abandoned without showing any emotion whatsoever" (17–18).

"Too Human": The Limited Scope of Cinematic Posthuman Embodiment

Despite the extent to which *Under the Skin* articulates posthuman embodiment, its scope remains constrained by an over-reliance on existing humanistic frameworks, particularly in its treatment of gender. The film paradoxically reinforces gender stereotypes by emphasising the male-female binary, instead of approaching gender from a posthuman mindset that transcends these distinctions. While *Under the Skin* initially presents a hybrid condition that blurs the line between human and nonhuman, it unfolds into a humanistic narrative in which a nonhuman being seeks to become human, more specifically, an alien woman striving to become a human woman. This film has the potential to portray a posthuman cyborg character that transcends the humanistic gender binary within a posthuman framework; nonetheless, it exhibits obvious limitations of being "too human" by

conceding to traditional gender norms. As Molloy et al. note, “portraits of artificial women are more successful at rehearsing humanistic perspectives on female embodiment than at envisioning posthuman womanhood” (110).

In a posthumanist view, the gender binary – particularly as it relates to gendered embodiment – is rooted in humanistic thought, emphasising the dualistic foundation of humanism. Critical posthumanism, therefore, frequently challenges this binary, advocating for a cyborgian conception of gender (Molloy et al. 107). This can be clearly seen in Haraway’s notion of the cyborg, where she argues that the persistence of the male-female binary reinforces humanist frameworks, imposing rigid boundaries and dichotomies that limit our embodied experience:

We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. Up till now (once upon a time), female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions. Only by being out of place could we take intense pleasure in machines, and then with excuses that this was organic activity after all, appropriate to females. Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth. (65–66)

Under the Skin explores such a cyborgian concept in a limited capacity. It constructs a condition of hybridisation through its nonhuman characters, whose embodiment traverses the human-nonhuman divide and for whom gendered bodies are acquired rather than innate. Nevertheless, the film continues to reproduce entrenched gender biases grounded in humanistic dualism. *Under the Skin* strengthens the humanistic othering of cyborg women and revives classical cinematic strategies that fetishise women’s bodies, reaffirming the binary distinctions between women and men, as well as humans and nonhumans (Molloy et al. 112). The film primarily highlights the subordination of women under male dominance in patriarchal structures. For instance, one alien character under a male human skin (Jeremy McWilliams) assumes a domineering role over the alien woman. He keeps gazing at her with a commanding stare, inspects her in a dark room and even calls other alien men to pursue her when she spares a human victim. The alien woman temporarily escapes her pursuers and gets saved by a human male who offers her shelter. After being together for a while, she

closes her eyes, signalling her willingness to have sex with him; the man responds without hesitation. This underscores the entrenched gendered hierarchies of male dominance in which men are seen as both exploiters and potential saviours of women. In this sense, Vernon Shetley interprets *Under the Skin* as highlighting the role of female allure in systems of exploitation. She compares this film with Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and posits that both films share the same premise: that a female figure controlled by a man becomes fascinated by another man, and defies her controller to gain autonomy (16).

Throughout the film, gender stereotypes conveyed through sexual innuendo also overshadow the posthumanist vision of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The alien woman, despite her nonhuman nature, embodies a range of female stereotypes. She is both a femme fatale who uses her charm to entice men and a damsel in distress subjected to sexual harassment and dependent on a good man for rescue. For Dijana Jelača, such feminist and gender themes in *Under the Skin* present a seeming paradox: "while their protagonists are nonhuman, they are also indisputably feminine in traditionally humanoid ways" (384). In this regard, the film employs its nonhuman protagonist as a vehicle for the objectification of women, portraying the female body as a sexualised object to gratify the male gaze. As Molloy et al. further point out, this paradoxical approach significantly restricts the examination of the nonhuman dimensions of this alien, who is also a human-like cyborg. *Under the Skin* emphasises the nonhuman aspects of its cyborg woman while simultaneously imbuing her with qualities traditionally associated with femininity within belief systems that rely on the male/female binary, such as humanism. This approach restricts the capacity to explore the nonhuman dimensions of this cyborg figure (119).

The persistence of the gender binary and stereotypical cinematic representations of women in *Under the Skin* partly stems from Johansson's physical allure and star persona. Johansson's superb performing skills successfully bring the alien character to life: she has received many related accolades, including the nomination of Best Actress in the British Independent Film Awards (2013)⁷ and from the Chicago Film Critics Association (2014).⁸

⁷ Vincent, Alice. "British Independent Film Awards: Dame Judi Dench and Scarlett Johansson nominated." *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 Nov. 2013, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/10440958/British-Independent-Film-Awards-Dame-Judi-Dench-and-Scarlett-Johansson-nominated.html.

⁸ Loring, Michael. "'Birdman' Garner Nine Chicago Film Critics Association Nominations." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 Dec. 2014, www.chicago.suntimes.com/2014/12/12/18457154/birdman-garners-nine-chicago-film-critics-association-nominations.

Nevertheless, the stardom achieved from her highly accomplished performance is largely linked to the expression of feminisation, which subsequently contributes to the character's pronounced feminisation, leading to an exaggeration of dualistic gender ideologies rooted in humanist frameworks rather than a sustained engagement with the film's themes of posthumanism. In this regard, a posthumanist reading reveals that the exploration of themes related to posthumanism in *Under the Skin* is insufficient, as this film is "too human" (Brown 18). The film could have addressed more posthumanist topics, such as critiquing gender binary representations, but its inextricable human nature, especially Johansson's human female figure, impairs deeper posthuman embodiment:

And yet the (all too) human limitations remain: humans, or more specifically men, cannot connect with their conspecifics. This may make Johansson a star (rather than a human being), but if, as outlined at the outset of this chapter via N. Katherine Hayles, feminism was one of several discourses, including posthumanism, designed to make humans view their enworlded and connected nature (women and men are not different species), then a posthumanist discourse, as well as a feminist one, are required not only to reflect the contemporary world, but also to critique the representations of it which are presented in (these) films. (Brown 18)

On a deeper level, the limited scope of cinematic posthuman embodiment in this film reflects the intrinsic constraint of posthumanism itself. It is symptomatic of that tendency to be "too human" we have previously analysed: despite its evolutionary and progressive vision beyond human-centred frameworks, posthumanism is still fundamentally shaped by human conceptual structures. While its discourse can blur the boundaries between humans and nonhumans, its articulation of posthuman embodiment cannot fully escape the human mindset. As a result, posthuman imaginaries⁹ tend to stay grounded in human understanding, eventually favouring human embodiment over nonhuman forms of existence. *Under the Skin* can be seen as a narrative of "becoming human", and, more specifically, "becoming woman", which contradicts Haraway's "cyborg" transcending species

⁹ The sociological term "imaginary" refers to the compilation of values, institutions, laws, and symbols that inform how individuals perceive their collective social life. According to Manfred B. Steger and Paul James, "Imaginaries are patterned convocations of the social whole. These deep-seated modes of understanding provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence—expressed, for example, in conceptions of 'the global,' 'the national,' 'the moral order of our time'" (23).

and gender binaries (65–66). In this process, the alien woman, initially a hybrid of human and nonhuman, actively seeks to become fully human, particularly striving to embody a “real woman” within the male-female dichotomy. After spending a few days under a human’s skin, the alien woman yearns to become a human woman. This is noticeable in several scenes where she tries to adapt to human life – eating human food, watching TV shows, visiting an ancient castle with a man, as well as accepting his help crossing puddles and walking down stairs during their journey. She even starts to feel uneasy about her original nonhuman nature, as evidenced by the scene when she consents to have sex with the man but abruptly stops to examine her human genitals and then runs away into the forest. Her actions indicate that she is afraid of revealing her nonhuman identity. This suggests that the film still assumes nonhumans inherently aspire to human qualities, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges humans over nonhumans.

The ‘exposure scene’ near the end of the film serves as an even stronger indicator of an anthropocentric triumph as well as a victory of patriarchy. In this scene, the alien woman is attacked by a male logger who initially attempts to rape her. After fighting back effortlessly, her human skin is torn away, exposing the nonhuman body before he finally burns her alive (fig. 3). This scene illustrates that a human perspective functions as the default lens in *Under the Skin*, particularly when the cyborg’s hybrid nature becomes visually apparent (Molloy et al. 120). This scene signifies the alien woman’s failed attempt to fully become human, accentuating her inability to cross the divide between human and nonhuman, and reinforcing the human-nonhuman binary. It also resembles patriarchal supremacy, as the flames engulfing her nonhuman body evoke imagery of a witch hunt, where the femme fatale who lures men is punished by them. The film thus concludes with a triumph of traditional humanistic values: humans defeat the nonhuman that harms them and men prevail over the femme fatale. As Molloy et al. observe, “While *Under the Skin*’s contrast of human and nonhuman materiality is aesthetically compelling, its tight alignment of The Female¹⁰ with femme fatale conventions indicates its conservatism regarding both gender and nonhuman embodiment” (121).

¹⁰ In the book *Screening the Posthuman*, the alien woman in *Under the Skin* is referred to as “The Female” (Molloy et al. 108).



Fig. 3, The 'exposure scene', 2013.

While *Under the Skin* engages with posthumanist themes, its narrative principally follows a humanistic framework rather than a posthuman paradigm transcending dualistic ideologies. Within this context, the human-nonhuman hybrid condition in *Under the Skin* can be read as a metaphor for posthumanism's "too human" dilemma. The alien protagonist is a nonhuman inside a human body, resembling a hybrid form of posthuman embodiment. This hybridity symbolises the central paradox of posthumanism: while it seeks to transcend humanist conceptions of subjectivity, identity, and embodiment, it remains articulated through human forms and conceptual frameworks inherited from humanism. The "becoming human" narrative in this film reflects how human perspectives inevitably overshadow nonhuman subjectivities within posthumanist discourse. Asserting that nonhumans desire to become human is clearly anthropocentric, but insisting that nonhumans must not have such a desire reproduces a similar form of anthropocentrism, since it still imposes a human-derived normative framework onto nonhuman subjectivity. In both cases, the nonhumans are interpreted and regulated through human conceptual categories; correspondingly, the nonhumans' longing to become human demonstrates that, even in a posthuman framework, humanity remains the dominant reference point, rendering posthumanism "too human". This constitutes the inherent but understandable

limitation of cinematic posthuman embodiment, which is inescapably bounded by human epistemic conditions in cinema and beyond.

Conclusion

We have shown that *Under the Skin* explores posthuman embodiment through a posthumanist lens by depicting a human-nonhuman hybrid condition. By illustrating a nonhuman entity inhabiting a human body, the film challenges the anthropocentric assumption that the body determines identity, demonstrating the cinematic potential for representing a cyborgian existence in which the human body and human identity are no longer synonymous. Nonetheless, such a posthuman embodiment is limited by a persistent tendency to be “too human”, which reveals a broader tension within posthumanist inquiry itself: while it seeks to question traditional anthropocentric approaches, it is structurally dependent on the very human-centred perspectives it aims to critique (James 32–37). Referring back to our initial question of whether there is an evolutionary or progressivist path to posthuman embodiment, we can now offer a tentative answer: while we can imagine and stage posthuman and nonhuman subjectivities beyond human-centred frameworks, such imagined forms ultimately remain circumscribed by human modes of perception and understanding.

To address this “too human” limitation, posthumanism needs to engage in sustained reflection on how it can acknowledge its own humanity while systematically interrogating the anthropocentric biases embedded within its theoretical structure. Rather than treating this drawback as a contradiction that invalidates posthumanism, it can serve as an impetus for self-reflexivity. Posthumanist thought is required to acknowledge its historically situated human origins and continually examine the influence of anthropocentric assumptions on its attempts to conceptualise ideas that extend beyond human-centred frameworks. Therefore, posthumanist discourses should not aim to eliminate human influence entirely, but to develop a more accountable mode of thinking that recognises its situated human perspective while remaining open to forms of existence and subjectivity that transcend it. Taken together, despite its inherent limitation of being “too human”, posthumanism can inspire us to engage in an extensive self-examination of the body, prompting us to move beyond the conventional belief that the body is a biological fact and a fixed demarcation

between humans and nonhumans. Instead, it invites us to rethink the body as something that can be transient, fluid, surpassed, and reconfigured.

Works Cited

- Arrival*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Paramount Pictures, 2016.
- Boslaugh, Sarah E. "Anthropocentrism." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11 Jan. 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism. Accessed 18 Mar. 2026.
- Braidotti, Rosi. "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, nos. 7–8, 2006, pp. 197–208.
- . *Posthuman Knowledge*. Polity Press, 2019.
- Brown, William. "From DelGuat to ScarJo." *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, edited by Michael Hauskeller et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 11–18.
- Clynes, Manfred E., and Nathan S. Kline. "Cyborgs and Space." *Astronautics*, vol. 5, no. 9, Sept. 1960, pp. 26–27.
- Cotter, Jennifer, et al., editors. *Human, All Too (Post)Human: The Humanities after Humanism*. Lexington Books, 2016.
- E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1982.
- Fenske, Michaela, and Martha Norkunas. "Experiencing the More-than-Human World." *Narrative Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 105–10, <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.4.2.0105>.
- Ferrando, Francesca. "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations." *Existenz*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2013, pp. 26–32.
- Ferrando, Francesca, and Rosi Braidotti. *Philosophical Posthumanism*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350059511>.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *Manifestly Haraway*, by Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3–90.
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Directed by Philip Kaufman, United Artists, 1978.

- James, Paul. "Alternative Paradigms for Sustainability: Decentring the Human without Becoming Posthuman." *Reimagining Sustainability in Precarious Times*, edited by Karen Malone et al., Springer Singapore, 2017, pp. 29–44.
- Jelača, Dijana. "Alien Feminisms and Cinema's Posthuman Women." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 43, no. 2, Jan. 2018, pp. 379–400, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693765>.
- Molloy, Missy, et al. *Screening the Posthuman*. Oxford University Press, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197538562.001.0001>.
- Shetley, Vernon. "Performing the Inhuman: Scarlett Johansson and SF Film." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 13–19, <https://doi.org/10.3828/sftv.2018.3>.
- Steger, Manfred B., and Paul James. "Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies." *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, vol. 12, nos. 1–2, 2013, pp. 17–40, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341240>.
- Under the Skin*. Directed by Jonathan Glazer, performance by Scarlett Johansson, A24, 2013. Film.
- Vertigo*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Paramount Pictures, 1958. Film.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	"Our bodies are hydrophilic": Queer Hydro-Politics in Robin Campillo's <i>120 BPM</i> (2017)
Author	Yi Song
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

“Our bodies are hydrophilic”: Queer Hydro-Politics in Robin Campillo’s *120 BPM* (2017)

Yi Song

University of Edinburgh

*The HIV/AIDS crisis has become a core theme in contemporary French cinema reflecting upon queer loss and collective response in times of social precarity. Despite the abundant use of liquid imagery in these works, scholarly discussion of how such imagery produces a conception of liquidity through which queer embodiment can be reimagined remains limited. This paper examines how Robin Campillo’s *120 Battements par Minute/120 BPM* (2017) mobilises liquid imagery to reconfigure queer embodiment and its political possibilities during the AIDS outbreak. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis’s *Bodies of Water* (2017), I argue that Campillo constructs queer bodies as permeable, porous, and gestational, thereby resisting the hegemonic heterosexual ideology premised upon the metaphysical integrity of the self – an idea that has facilitated gay oppression. Attending to Campillo’s deployment of liquid imagery across multiple scales, this paper investigates water as both a metaphor and a physical element, considering the proximity between queer corporeality and wider bodies of water as a trans-corporeal ethic that sustains marginal existence. I argue that Campillo’s queer hydro-politics transforms liquids from signs of contamination into an ecological medium of shared vulnerability, collective action, and non-reproductive futurity. This queer futurity challenges both systematic oppression of gay people and the prevalent anti-social thesis in queer theory.*

Introduction

“We had never really discussed it until the red, red blood on the white, white sink made it impossible to look away. Something had to come out and out it came. Gushing” (Caron, *The Nearness of Others* 25). In queer theorist David Caron’s experience after his HIV diagnosis, blood, spurting from the skin, triggers a discussion about HIV/AIDS with his friends. Since bodies have become symbols of rational social order, bodily fluids that violate carnal borders and leak into public spaces are considered threats in social norms (Misgav and Johnson 732). In his film *120 Battements par Minute* (2017, abbreviated as *120 BPM*), Robin Campillo sees the political potential of fluidity, using liquid as a central visual cue that runs throughout the work. The film is set during the early 1990s, showing the grassroots

political organisation ACT UP-Paris's activism against the apathy of the Mitterrand government towards HIV/AIDS. The film unfolds through queer activism and the romance between Sean (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart), an energetic protester who is seropositive, and Nathan (Arnaud Valois), a new member who witnesses Sean's gradual death.

Critics have noted the abundant liquid imagery in *120 BPM*, describing the film as "an insistent and repeated juxtaposition of plasticity and fluidity" (Dalton 203), "a rallying cry" (Hartford 219) marked by "the bloodied waves of the Seine" (Hartford 218), and "the aqua of collective kinship" (Hoad, "Viral Visuality" section). Despite these insights, a reading of *120 BPM* with regard to the political potential of liquidity remains underdeveloped. This gap, as Bourdeau argues, might result from "a close relationship between sexuality, fluids, and infection" (114) that can lead to pathologisation and moral condemnation. However, it should be noticed that Campillo displays liquidity across multiple scales, from cellular fluids flowing in human bodies to the Seine in Paris, which illustrates the proximity of queer corporeality and wider bodies of water on an ecological level. Therefore, this paper investigates the political potential of liquid imagery in *120 BPM*, employing it as both a physical element and a metaphor that animates queer critique and queer activism. In demonstrating the layered meanings of liquidity in both queer theory and *120 BPM*, I first focus on how bodily fluids – such as blood, sweat and semen – are stigmatised by heteronormative society and made remarkably visible by Campillo in the film. Crucially, this visibility moves beyond the sphere of individual trauma and gives rise to a logic of fluids that blurs the self-other boundary, thus fostering shared vulnerability and collective action. The article then explores water as an ecological medium in *120 BPM* that interweaves queer history, loss and the materiality of the Seine River, advocating an ethics of trans-corporeality between the body and the environment that sustains the marginal existence.

Placing *120 BPM* in dialogue with cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis's study, *Bodies of Water* (2017), this paper argues that queer bodies are permeable, gestational, and porous, resisting the hegemonic heteronormative ideology about discrete bodies. Neimanis uses a posthuman feminist approach to reconfigure human embodiment as watery and deny an autonomous and anthropocentric understanding of the body. By exploring the intersection and immersion of queer bodies and liquidity in Campillo's *120 BPM*, this paper argues that

Campillo echoes Neimanis's undoing of a sovereign body to rethink a fluid mode of queer existence. The watery bodies of queer people in the film challenge multiple spatial borders: between the inside and outside of the skin; between the self and the other; and between human bodies and the waterscape of the city. This erosion of borders transforms bodily fluids from signs of contamination into queer hydro-politics of shared vulnerability, collective action, and non-reproductive futurity. By thinking through a watery lens to reimagine the connection between queer people and unruly fluids, this article articulates a new queer futurity that gestates collectivities, challenging both systematic oppression of gay people and the prevalent anti-social thesis of total negativity in queer theory.

Porous Boundary of Queer Corporeality

In the dominant Western understanding of embodiment, an ontological division separates the biological from the cultural, and the body from its surrounding environments (Tuana 189). This tradition of dualism excludes uncontrollable elements from a stable framework through which individuals make sense of the world they live in. Via this same logic, bodies are understood and disciplined as autonomous entities by social and legal institutions in order to uphold the operation of these systems. As Neimanis puts it, "regimes of human rights, citizenship, and property for the most part all depend upon individualized, stable, and sovereign bodies ... as both a norm and a goal" (2). In other words, bodies are estranged as discrete individuals from other humans and their surroundings, with their borders thus being defined by the skin. While this paradigm of dichotomy underpins social systems, it becomes problematic in the context of pandemic as it provides justification for condemning others. Amid the HIV/AIDS crisis, public discourse has described gay men as "contaminated vessels" (Bersani 17). Queer scholar Leo Bersani contends that this metaphor ascribes the transmission of AIDS to gay men's promiscuity, thus morally rationalising gay oppression. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted as a consequence of the notion of the body as a sealed container to enclose bodily fluids. One must emphasise the independence of corporeality in order to protect the integrity of their own body, which eliminates the possibility of seeing bodies as common ground.

Similar to the metaphor of bodies as vessels, the metaphor of the 'closet' also reinforces the discourse of the discrete body, which reflects systematic gay oppression and excludes queer people from heteronormative spaces. Metaphorically, the closet is a space of secrecy and confinement that prevents queer people's sexuality from being known. In addition to this symbolic connotation, Michael Brown finds that the closet metaphor also has spatial counterparts in real life, such as gay men's secret gathering places that divide their physical geographies (47). The closet metaphor also suggests the notion of a discrete body, as though queer people have sufficient free will to choose the placement of their bodies: they hide by placing themselves in the closet or liberate themselves by coming out of it. However, the relationships around queer bodies are more complex than closing or opening the door of the closet. Being in the closet can be seen as a form of internalised oppression that requires gay people to conform to heteronormative expectations. As Eve Sedgwick points out, for a queer person, every encounter with someone new erects new closets that require "new surveys, new calculations, new draughts, and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure" (68). Therefore, the closet describes queer absence "in countless interlocking ways", and "subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be" (Brown 1). The prevailing heterosexual presumption about the closet is a deliberate simplification that situates queer people in a marginalised space and keeps others unthreatened. Both the metaphors of the closet and of gay men as vessels embody a dual oppression by assuming a discrete body, via which the dominant public can distance themselves from queer people physically and socially.

These metaphors of bodily containers in relation to queer people suggest a sharp boundary between inside and outside, containment and release, as well as secrecy and disclosure. Although, as Didier Eribon suggests, the closet might engender a "play with prohibition" (49) that enables queer pride and freedom within boundaries, a watery understanding of the body offers an alternative mode of intersubjective queer existence through its permeation of these boundaries, be it the skin, the closet, or human/nature distinction. Donna Haraway identifies the work of queerness as "undoing 'normal' categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation" (xxiv). In this sense, the characteristics of water, such as fluidity, permeability, circulation, and the infinite connections among different bodies of water, resonate strongly with the political

commitment of queerness to embracing openness and entanglement. Placing queer bodies in aqueous relations, rather than in containers, can deconstruct the normative notion of autonomous bodies and open an alternative paradigm to transcend the logic of dichotomy. This proximity between queerness and water has been exhibited in cinema. In particular, Loïc Bourdeau recognises an extensive liquid imaginary conjured up by HIV/AIDS in French cinema, from Guiraudie's *L'Inconnu du Lac* (2013) to Campillo's work. The water in *120 BPM* mobilises the subversive power of queerness at both the material and symbolic levels in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

As Neimanis suggests, understanding watery experience begins with attending to "the specific ways in which water travels, and the specific kinds of bodies that certain waters comprise, transform, and dissolve" (23). In *120 BPM*, it is the protagonists' shared identities as people with HIV/AIDS, along with that of their loved ones, that characterise their engagement with water. The lives of HIV seropositive characters are inextricably dependent upon the human water cycle: they must drink water every four hours to take their medications and get intravenous fluids regularly. The ingested water is then transformed into excretion, tears, semen, or blood. Because water both sustains their lives and, in the form of bodily fluids, infects them with HIV/AIDS, it serves as an apt visual symbol of protest against the government's reluctance to disseminate anti-AIDS education and pharmaceutical companies' delays in releasing clinical trial data. Blood appears repeatedly in the film as a metonymy for both the transmission of HIV/AIDS and activism. Its recurrence builds a visual rhythm that vibrates with the urgency of addressing HIV/AIDS as it will lead to death if left unattended.

Campillo presents blood as unruly. In a scene near the beginning of the film, ACT UP-Paris visits Melton Pharm to ask for the test results of a new HIV medicine. Using blood as the implement of their protest, a member passes a bag of fake blood to Sean from directly opposite him. The bag explodes the moment it touches Sean's fingers, spilling all over his body. This explosive bag of fake blood symbolises the bodily fluids of people with HIV/AIDS – fluids that move beyond their control. In a later scene, when an ACT UP-Paris member is learning to produce fake blood, his nose begins bleeding without him realising it. This unpredictable flow of bodily fluids is the norm for members of this organisation. During the

amphitheatre gatherings, bloodstains appear repeatedly on multiple members' faces and clothing. It is impossible to distinguish whether it is the fake blood lingering after a collective action or their own blood.

Flowing outward from the body's organs into the external environment, uncontained bodily fluids in *120 BPM* radically challenge the idea that the skin marks the outer boundary of the body. With the relinquishment of the integrity of one's own body, an individual enters relations with other bodies that materially course through them. Campillo further visualises this fluidity of bodily boundaries in a clubbing scene. Framed in a wide high angle shot, as the activists' torsos grow invisible in the darkness, only the waving of their arms is captured in the dazzling disco lights. The camera gradually shifts focus from the characters to foregrounded dust particles bumping in beams of light, blurring the concrete shapes of human bodies. In the deep blue sheen that creates a feeling of being submerged in deep water, the rhythmic movement of the arms and dust imitates the regular ebb and flow of water, making the human and non-human subjects aquatic creatures that sway within the current (see fig. 1). After the refocusing of the camera, dust turns into the computer-generated images of the cells in bloodstreams, then cuts to a hand-drawn sketch of cells projected on a screen. As Dalton argues, instead of showing a teleological narrative from contamination to death, this scene indicates "a circular movement of material, formal interactions in which queer bodies, biologies, relationships and politics occur as communal metamorphoses effectuated within an atmosphere of self-abandonment" (201). Dissolving, within the fluid atmosphere, the ontological distinction between individual bodies, dust, and cells, watery bodies deny the skin's function of dividing individuals from one another and humans from their environment.



Fig. 1, ACT UP-Paris members dance in a club, 2017.

Queer Gestationality in Bodies of Water

The act of being together in watery bodies is both an erotic and a political gesture that goes beyond the confinement of skin because unstable and permeable bodies are queer people's subversive mode of existence to challenge individualism characterised by a sovereign self. This communality of bodies is exhibited in the sex between Sean and Nathan, which continues the sense of immersion and intimacy that Campillo creates in the clubbing scene. They lie together in a bedroom, facing each other in an atmosphere of grief after the death of an ACT UP-Paris member. The camera zooms in to a microscopic level as they move to kiss, showing cellular processes in the bloodstreams. The image of cells then progressively cross-dissolves to a translucent blue liquid that occupies the entire screen, with faint silhouettes of Sean and Nathan floating in it (see fig. 2). This scene renders difficult any attempt to distinguish between their bodies' interior and exterior. Extracellular fluids flowing in blood vessels suddenly transmute into the water in which they are submerged, making Sean and Nathan seem like two cells belonging to a single body. This sequence is followed by an extreme close-up shot that depicts Nathan touching Sean's body from the neck to the waist. As Caron contends, to be touched evokes a sense of "one's corporeal limits" ("AIDS/holocaust: Metaphor and French universalism" 280), which is also the limitation of the self.

This behaviour of touching, therefore, is emblematic of the negotiation of the boundaries of their bodies and the resistance of discrete corporeality. In his discussion about the *jouissance* of queer sex, Bersani argues that as long as physiological sex differences exist, sexual relations between males and females are the eroticisation of the social structure of dominance and submission (20). Thus, considering the cultural taboo on anal sex and promiscuity, Bersani proposes that gay men “should resist being drawn into mimicking the unrelenting warfare between men and women” (25). In *120 BPM*, depicting queer sex via bodies of water erects the mutual erotic that suspends hierarchical relations of power through permeability. This approach decentres desire from the physicality of the body, bringing it into a sense of flow and interconnectedness. This “loss of the ego” (27), in Bersani’s terms, locates the potential of political transformation in the radical openness of the body, shattering fixed power structures built upon the sovereign subject.

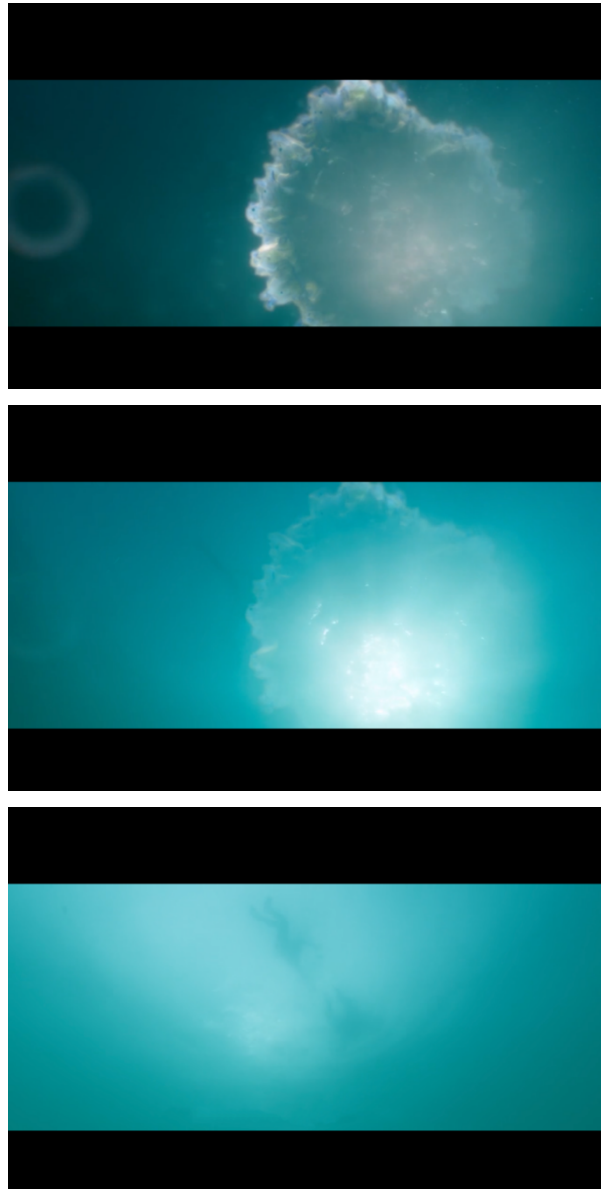


Fig. 2, The cellular processes presented during the sex of Sean and Nathan, 2017.

While the permeability of bodies enables the closeness of different subjects during sex, Neimanis points out how this watery embodiment sheds light on an expanded understanding of reproduction that prioritises the proliferation of new beings and social relations over one's own materiality. Because of the association between life and water – from humans in amniotic fluid to microbes in pools – fecundity has been characterised by Jamie Linton as the essential nature of water (3). Neimanis extends water's ability to generate new lives to the realm of posthumanism, calling this "gestationality" (68).

Gestationality refers to “the meeting of at least two bodies of difference in order to proliferate further life” (Neimanis 92), which refuses the necessity of the human reprosexual womb and the overlapping of the feminine with the maternal. Therefore, this mode of reproduction is fundamentally queer as it is released from a heteronormative binary view of bodies. Neimanis further suggests that gestationality occurs through permeability, which nurtures other bodies through transiting across and between different corporealities (98). However, this discussion of permeability is not a naive statement that every aqueous life melts together into the same body of water. Instead, interchanges of life-proliferating matter are achieved through the amnion, which simultaneously allows permeability and sustains the difference between bodies (Neimanis 95-96). Neimanis radically redefines gestationality not as a biological essentialist dimension of female morphology but accentuates an ongoing and permeable form of becoming, a “proliferation of life-in-the-plural” (106).

The gestationality of water facilitates a mode of sociality that nourishes others in one’s own aqueous flesh and foregrounds the possibility of new beings emerging from oneself. In *120 BPM*, ACT UP-Paris embodies this gestational modality because its members unify their bodies and forces to become a collective new form of existence in order to bring the urgency of the AIDS crisis into the public discourse. Although the organisation’s gatherings in the amphitheatre are marked by disputes and disagreements, these differences do not prevent voices from permeating from one person to another. After the death of Jeremie (Ariel Borenstein), a history student in the organisation, members of ACT UP-Paris parade down the city’s streets holding copies of his funeral portrait. With Sean leading the cry, “*Sida, homo, l’indifférence de meure*” (“AIDS, gay, we die of indifference”), other members follow and repeat the chant in a collective sound. Multiple bodies of ACT UP-Paris members transform into an amplifier for a singular, shared voice, responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis in 1990s French society. The shot of the funeral procession is a close-up, tracking the participants’ facial expressions as they cry and their unified movement on the street. It presents a moving gesture that invites the audience to participate in the parade and embed themselves in this new body.

In putting forth the queer gestationality of water, Neimanis emphasises that this process directs to instantiations of “yet-to-come” (88), a future tense that is distant from the prevalent anti-social thesis among queer theorists. Because bodies share the same gestational logic as water, the possibility of generating a future is enfolded in the permeability between bodies, which responds to the queer futurity of negativity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman contends that to address the dominant political imagination that employs reproductive futurism as its basis, queerness occupies a status of resistance by challenging the structure that is dedicated to the image of the Child. Similarly, Jack Halberstam considers the influence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, claiming that queer time deviates from the normative temporal frames of reproduction, family, and inheritance, facing a constantly diminishing future (13). Both Edelman and Halberstam dismiss queer futurity by reducing reproduction strictly to biological procreation or normative symbolic continuity. The yet-to-come aqueous gestationality opens a space for imagining an alternative version of queer futurity – one that reproduces a collective sociality and political continuity to secure a future where vulnerable people are taken care of. As Nicole Seymour demonstrates, this is an intersection between queer and ecological values that cares not just about the descendants but “about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations” (27), and which allows the development of political alliances. ACT UP-Paris’s members share the value of aiming to protect the public from further HIV infection through theatrical actions and the disclosure of their own identity as people with HIV/AIDS, thereby practising future-oriented and relational care essential for queer survival.

This queer futurity, emerging from elemental thoughts, requires individuals to “become milieu as womb ... or milieu for gardens that will grow from our deathly and discarded matters” (Neimanis 102). In *120 BPM*, this futurity manifests not merely as a metaphor but also in the death of three ACT UP-Paris members. The film opens in the amphitheatre, with an announcement that a founding member of the organisation has died. Instead of mourning, the members rapidly shift the meeting towards employing his death to raise the Mitterrand government’s awareness about HIV/AIDS. Sequences about the deaths of Jeremie and Sean follow a similar narrative. Initially, Jeremie actively participates in several ACT UP-Paris activities; then, his health condition worsens with a decreasing T-

cell count. His funeral is highly political, becoming a site for another ACT UP-Paris action. Meanwhile, the deterioration of Sean's health proceeds as the film unfolds, interwoven with the activist group's collective story. At the end of the film, Sean's funeral serves as ACT UP-Paris's protest against a pharmaceutical company, and the scene is intercut with a clubbing and a sex scene. The short rapid cuts between these three scenes are connected through flashing disco lights; spaces shift with every few flashes. When the screen fades to black, the film credits roll. Death is registered both at the beginning and end of the film. As Benjamin Dalton states, "Sean's death in the film is not seen as an end, but yet another entry into the film's cyclical sequences of kenotic yet ineffaceable queer forms and essences" (202). This structure adopts circularity and repetition rather than a linear narrative, corresponding to the gestational potential of queer futurity. The death of each member is not the end of action but forges a new space for reinforcing the political demands of ACT UP-Paris. The ways members' corpses engage in activism demonstrate the gestational characteristic of water: a transformation that turns an individual into a nourishing environment that enables new beings to flourish.

Moreover, the sequence of Jeremie's death brings closer the public and people with HIV/AIDS to generate a new "we" in the fight against the virus. On his deathbed, Jeremie recounts the history of the French Revolution of 1848, with the crosscutting between real-life archival footage of ACT UP-Paris and scenes of the medical treatment Jeremie received. The marginalised situation of people with HIV/AIDS parallels the crowds during the Revolution who suffered social and political oppression from the dominant class, thus integrating the history of ACT UP-Paris's resistance into the official narrative of the nation. Jason Hartford observes this intention in Campillo's *mise-en-scène* of the French national colours, which "insists on queer identification with, and reintegration into, the French republic" (220). As a result, the film rejects the view of seeing people with HIV/AIDS as the Other by evoking the feeling of togetherness across people from different generations and historical backgrounds.

Urban Waterscapes and Hydrocommon

While water provides a posthuman approach to metaphorically reflecting upon queer activism, characters in *120 BPM* engage with the urban waterscape in a physical sense, interweaving their bodies into the water cycle. As the centre of Paris's cityscape, the Seine is associated with local queer history. Since the eighteenth century, the Seine's banks and quays have been cruising grounds for gay men to seek sex (Sibalis 18). This use declined after the 1970s due to fears of HIV/AIDS among other reasons, such as the expansion of commercial gay space in Paris (Sibalis 22). Campillo evokes and reflects this local history in the activism of ACT UP-Paris. When members of the organisation are pasting posters along the banks of the Seine to circulate knowledge about HIV/AIDS, a gay couple wandering there makes the accusation that these posters scare them and prevent them from enjoying sex.

Following this queer appropriation of the urban waterscape, Campillo presents the Seine being dyed red to make the HIV/AIDS epidemic pivotal in public awareness and show the shared vulnerability of human beings in this crisis (see fig. 3). The sound of the Seine's red currents interweaves with Sean's laboured breaths, with the cross-cutting between the blood-red dye flooding the river and Sean lying on a hospital bed. The body of Sean and the flow of the Seine become inseparable – even the pronunciations of their names are similar – as though the river is also a body. Scholarship has identified that *120 BPM* repeatedly juxtaposes queer bodies with bodies of water to show their inability to be dissolved and effaced (Dalton 202). Considering the hydrological cycle, this trans-corporeality is not metaphorical but material. Human bodies intake reservoir water; bodily liquids descend into moist soil; groundwater flows into the city's rivers. As Neimanis demonstrates, water connects our bodies to other worlds beyond our human selves, which extends to “a more expansive sense of ‘we’” (12). In this respect, the water that passes through Sean's body is also the Seine that transports blood around the city. When ACT UP-Paris distributes HIV/AIDS prevention materials at a school, a girl responds that she will not get AIDS because she is not gay. This sequence illustrates how HIV/AIDS has been commonly acknowledged as a consequence of “the gay lifestyle” (Crimp 238). The bloody Seine challenges this presumption because water, an element susceptible to poisoning, is the point of communion among human bodies. As long as we, with our porous bodies, live in the hydrocommon, we share a vulnerability under the threat of the HIV/AIDS crisis.



Fig. 3, The Seine being dyed red, 2017.

However, living in a hydrocommon does not indicate that humans are homogeneous subjects experiencing equal exposure to possible harms from water, given the complex conflicts of interests and various sets of power relations in social and political systems. Through his study on breathing – an elemental experience analogous to water – Jean-Thomas Tremblay points out an “uneven distribution of risk” (2) among populations facing a shared challenge. This uneven distribution means that different individuals experience unequally the vulnerability of breathing because of their varied statuses within the weaponisation, monetisation, and pollution of the air (Tremblay 2). This differential distribution is also observable in the mismanagement of HIV/AIDS as a public health crisis. Either in the context of France or other countries, the combined actions of biological particles with social and political processes have resulted in disproportionate impacts on queer people in this epidemic. In particular, universalism is a traditional value in France, under which “equal and autonomous citizens live harmoniously within a centralised and homogeneous nation state” (Sibalis 35). Under this circumstance, minorities are either expected to assimilate into the monolithic national value or are excluded from political legitimacy (Caron, “AIDS/holocaust: Metaphor and French universalism” 63). Therefore, any form of community, including the organisations of AIDS activists, risks advocating divisive identity politics and undermining the national value of universalism (Rees-Roberts 17). The

inherent erasure of non-normative communities leads to the government's and the public's ignorance of the particularity of queer people, who have suffered the heaviest losses from the HIV/AIDS crisis. Therefore, the trans-corporeal subject in *120 BPM* that emerges from the entanglement between Sean and the Seine is not merely a symbol of HIV/AIDS or of Paris under the threat of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Instead, it marks queer history that crystallised in the epidemic, from the oppression of the heteronormative hegemony to the marginalisation of queer people within the framework of French universalism.

Compared with the sense of intimacy and immersion in the blue imagery in the clubbing scene and sex scene, Campillo's radical portrayal of the bloody Seine shifts the emphasis into public crisis and political exposure. As Matthew Gandy states, "the history of cities can be read as a history of water" (22). The Seine serves as common ground that has witnessed the losses of Paris, from the massacre of Algerians thrown into the river by police in 1961 to the deaths of queer people who had once wandered its banks. By turning the Seine into a river of blood, *120 BPM* theatrically shows that the blood of queer people cannot be hidden.

Conclusion

120 BPM shows that queer activists' practice is a process of challenging the normative to enable alternative ways of being, which breaks boundaries between normative and non-normative sexualities, nature and culture, and human and non-human. The use of water in *120 BPM* reveals the relationships among queer bodies, queer activism, and social systems. The uncontrolled bodily fluids and unstable corporeal boundaries of people with HIV/AIDS in *120 BPM* contest the construction of discrete body in the heteronormative paradigm that alienates queer people. Campillo imagines a temporary suspension of hierarchical power relations through such porosity, which points to an erotic and political togetherness of different bodies. By emphasising the corporeal porosity and permeability, a new being – the collective response to the AIDS epidemic by ACT UP-Paris – is born from this carnal closeness with water's gestationality, which envisages a new queer futurity. This queer future reproduces collectivities that do not centre on the figurative Child, distinguishing itself from

the anti-social thesis proposed by Edelman and Jack Halberstam that equates reproduction with biological procreation. Moreover, the Seine in the city interweaves with Sean's body as a marker of shared vulnerability of social life, presenting HIV/AIDS as a challenge for human beings inhabiting a hydrocommon. The trans-corporeal subject formed from Sean and the Seine reveals HIV/AIDS as the result of both biological contagion and social and political events, and shows the severe losses queer people have experienced during this crisis.

While water might transmit toxic substances, and as bodily fluids be particularly risky regarding HIV transmission, what flows and connects through water across different bodies are also activism and care. By filming the collective trauma of the HIV/AIDS crisis in France during the early 1990s, Robin Campillo invites the audience to consider how the queer community can respond to challenges in contemporary society through bodies of water and their capacities of fluidity, permeability, gestationality, and trans-corporeality.

Works Cited

- Bersani, Leo. *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Bourdeau, Loïc. "Robin Campillo's *120 Battements Par Minute*, or When the Dust Unsettles". *Intertexts*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2022, pp. 111-127.
- Brown, Michael P. *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*. Routledge, 2005.
- Campillo, Robin, director. *120 battements par minute*. Les Films de Pierre, 2017.
- Caron, David. "AIDS/holocaust: Metaphor and French Universalism". *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2005, pp. 63-73.
- . *The Nearness of Others: Searching for Tact and Contact in the Age of HIV*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Crimp, Douglas. "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic". *October*, vol. 43, 1987, pp. 237-271.
- Dalton, Benjamin. "Queer, Plastic Residues: Biological Mutability and Queer Resistance in Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* (2017) and the Work of Catherine Malabou". *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2022, pp. 193-208.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- Eribon, Didier. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- Gandy, Matthew. *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*. The MIT Press, 2003.
- Halberstam, J. Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005.
- Haraway, Donna. "Companion Species, Mis-recognition, and Queer Worlding". *Queering the Non/human*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, pp. xxiii-xxxvi.
- Hartford, Jason. "Colouring the Claim: Visual Code and National Allegiance in *120 Battements par minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017)". *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2022, pp. 209-225.
- Hoad, JN. "BPM: Duration and Endurance". *Blind Field*, 10 July 2020, <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2020/07/10/bpm-duration-and-endurance/>
- Linton, Jamie. *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*. UBC Press, 2010.

- Misgav, Chen and Lynda Johnston. "Dirty Dancing: The (Non) Fluid Embodied Geographies of a Queer Nightclub in Tel Aviv". *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 15, no. 7, 2014, pp. 730-746.
- Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Rees-Roberts, Nick. *French Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.
- Seymour, Nicole. *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Sibalis, Michael D. "Paris". *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, edited by David Higgs, Routledge, 1999, pp. 10-37.
- Tremblay, Jean-Thomas. *Breathing Aesthetics*. Duke University Press, 2022.
- Tuana, Nancy. "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina". *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 188-213.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Wot For? Rot and Fertility in Katherine Mansfield's "The Woman at the Store" (1912)
Author	Maeve Stemp
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Wot For? Rot and Fertility in Katherine Mansfield's "The Woman at the Store" (1912)

Maeve Stemp

University of Edinburgh

*How can one mobilise limited agency under patriarchal structures which value female fertility as finitely consumable? In "The Woman at the Store", Katherine Mansfield renders ambiguous the boundary between rot and fertility in order to catalyse a shift in conceptualisations of female fertility from finite consumption to decomposition. This change allows for a recycling of materials, where change is cyclical rather than finite, and where matter is changed but not reduced. This rot and decomposition then embody a resistance to patriarchal imperatives that imagine the female body and its fertility as in service to others and to the colonial imperatives which imagine the female and non-human elements of the story as contributing to a colonial 'new world' in New Zealand. I propose that engagement with rot and decomposition embodies a form of agency that mobilises deviance within the story, where rot becomes an aesthetic that reveals limited agency for the subaltern. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett argues that "bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage" rather than as individual beings (23). This essay will argue that in the agentic assemblage in "The Woman at the Store", women appropriate images and ideals of fertility with concurrent images of rot. Moving on to the non-human elements of the assemblage, I explore how the use of unconventional animal metaphors challenges the homogeny of the animal as referent, making them unusable as metaphors aligned with consumption. Lastly, I will argue that plants in the assemblage act both as indicators of geographical fertility and symbols which reveal figurative dualisms and tensions within systems of power as an element of the agentic assemblage. This tracing of the different agentic valences of the assemblage (women, animals, plants) will allow for the identification of their collective assertion of agency in the text.*

In a letter to her husband John Middleton Murry a year before her death in 1923, Katherine Mansfield ruminates on a passage from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1623) which reads: "This common body, / Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream, / Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide / To rot itself with motion" (4.1.48-51). She confesses to find that this passage

contains such a terribly deep psychological truth. 'That rots itself'... and the idea of it returning and returning, never swept out to sea finally. You may think you have done with it for ever, but comes a change of tide and there is that dark streak reappeared, more sickeningly rotten still. I understand that better than I care to. I mean – alas! – I have proof of it in my own being. (Mansfield *Selected Letters* 241)

The proof of rot to which Mansfield here refers is the chronic gonorrhoea with which she was infected as a young woman. After her contraction in 1908, she fell seriously ill with peritonitis, leading to the removal of her left fallopian tube and rendering her infertile (Smith "Common Certain Understanding" 45). The untreated disease later caused arthritis, heart disease, and pleurisy, all of which would later become significant issues in conjunction with the tuberculosis that eventually took her life (Smith "Common Certain Understanding" 45). Although it was not until 1918 that her doctor informed her of the impact of the untreated gonorrhoea on her declining health, Claire Tomalin contends that Mansfield was aware for some time of the relationship between her youthful sexual encounters and her poor health (39, 45). She died at 34 while seeking treatment for her tuberculosis in France (Tomalin 34). The "dark streak" of rot in Mansfield's letter takes on several modes: it is a cyclical movement, ever returning, "sickening". Mansfield's relationship to the concept of rot is linked to sexual desire and to fertility, as well as to a deeply engrained sense of shame in inhabiting a body with "proof" of rot. She was a young woman who was failed by a medical system that was negligent in recognising and treating her condition, and whose fears and hopes became intertwined with a self concept tightly bound to the idea of rot.

Mansfield's "The Woman at the Store" was written in 1911 and published in *Rhythm* magazine in 1912, four years after she likely contracted the disease. The story depicts an aging woman isolated in the New Zealand wilderness, who has murdered her husband and is then visited by three travellers. The story engages with the ideas and aesthetics of rot and fertility through rotting and women's bodies, animals, and plants. In a remarkably innovative turn, the story renders ambiguous the boundary between rot and fertility. This ambiguity catalyses a shift from a finite consumption of fertility to decomposition. In doing so Mansfield's text resists the patriarchal imperatives that imagine the female body as in service to others and the colonial imperative which imagine the female and non-human elements of the story as contributing to a colonial 'new world' in New Zealand.

The aesthetics of rot and fertility in the story and in Mansfield's broader body of work have not yet been interpreted in Mansfield studies. While recent feminist work with Mansfield's earlier short stories, such as that of Elyse Blankley, Doreen D'Cruz, and John Ross, explore gender roles as supporting conceptions of colonial identity, this paper identifies in this convergence between gender and colonialism a shared site for potential agency and resistance against these two forms of oppression.

I want to understand fertility in this text as a state of being in which an object or being has the capacity for production. This production can be of children, through sexual fertility, of labour, in a more virile understanding of fertility, or of edible materials, such as meat or plants. When change is enacted on fertile beings or objects, it is predominantly in the realm of consumption: a finite production of, for example, children, labour, or meat, that ultimately leads to a finite 'using up' of the fertile object/being, for example, the womb, worker, or animal. A shift from consumption to decomposition allows for a recycling of materials, where change is cyclical rather than finite and where matter is changed but not reduced. I propose that engagement with rot and decomposition embodies its own form of agency that mobilises deviance within the story, aligned with Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Melissa Sanchez's argument that the ideas of rot and decomposition are "a mobilized politics of intentional deviance grounded in limited agency and constrained choices" (139). Rot becomes an aesthetic that reveals limited agency for the subaltern, presenting a means of evading a finite 'using up' of fertility. To avoid being consumed, one must become unconsumable. While the agency in the story is limited, it represents a meagre means of resistance in a context where a positive outcome is impossible.

In the case of "The Woman at the Store", the women in the story, the gendered livestock and farm animals, and the local and cultivated plants all play important roles in the overall assertion of agency that engages with rot and decomposition. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett highlights the role of assemblages – groups of human and non-human factors connected by various affects produced on and by one another – in the creation of agency (23). She argues that though each member of the assemblage "has a certain vital force, ... there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage", where "bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage" rather than as individual beings (Bennett 24, 23). The elements of the assemblage in the story embody a resistance to

the consumption of their fertility in different forms, whether it is the edibility and mobility in animals, the sexual and physical labour of women, or the food and aesthetic uses of plants.

This article will first argue that in the assemblage in “The Woman at the Store”, women appropriate images and ideals of fertility with concurrent images of rot. Then, moving on to non-human elements of the assemblage, I examine how the use of unconventional animal metaphors challenges the homogeny of the animal as referent, making them unstable as metaphors aligned with consumption. Lastly, I will argue that plants in the assemblage act both as indicators of geographical fertility and symbols which reveal figurative dualisms and tensions within systems of power as an element of the agentic assemblage. This tracing of the different agentic valences of the assemblage (i.e. women, animals, plants) will allow for the identification of their collective assertion of agency in the text. Through the aesthetics of rot, this collective agency resists the ‘using up’ of its subjects in the form of sexual violence against women, the exploited labour of animals, and the culinary and aesthetic consumption of plants.

Women’s Bodies

Women’s bodies function as a foregrounding aspect of the agentic assemblage in “The Woman at the Store” in which women appropriate images and ideals of fertility alongside images of rot. Recalling Wakana Tompkins and Sanchez’s argument for rot as a politics of deviance grounded in limited agency (139), the characters’ tarnishing of images of fertility with those of rot allows them to avoid the finite consumption of their fertility by men in the story within their limited agency under the patriarchal oppression they face.

At the dinner table when all the characters are assembled in the woman’s store, the woman drunkenly narrates her own infertility. She announces:

It’s six years since I was married, and four miscarriages. I says to ‘im, I says, what do you think I’m doin’ up ‘ere? If you was back at the coast, I’d ‘ave you lynched for child murder. Over and over I tells ‘im — you’ve broken my spirit and spoiled my looks, and wot for — that’s wot I’m driving at ... Oh, some days — an’ months of them — I ‘ear them two words knockin’ inside me all the time — ‘Wot for!’ but sometimes I’ll be cooking the spuds an’ I lifts the lid off to give ‘em a prong and I ‘ears, quite suddin again, ‘Wot for!’ (Mansfield, “Woman” 16)

This devastating confession punctuated by the desperate rhetorical question, “wot for”, provides the motive for the subsequent revelation that the woman has shot and buried her

husband. It is important to recognise that in 1921, New Zealand had the second highest maternal mortality rate in the Western world (Pollock). Notably, the likelihood of a miscarriage increases with each subsequent impregnation and miscarriage ("Causes & Prevalence"). Her repeated impregnation at the time, had it continued, would be tantamount to a death sentence when considering the description of the decrepit and unsanitary home (Mansfield, "Woman" 16) and the fact that almost all contemporary maternal deaths were caused by sepsis (Pollock). Cherry Hankin argues that the tone of the text is one of "outrage at the biological helplessness of women" (29). This biological helplessness, in which even the most precarious fertility is grounds for consumption "over and over", is resisted by the woman at the store when she appropriates rot as a form of fertility in the murder of her husband (Mansfield, "Woman" 16). His body is decomposed into fertiliser when he is buried. She will never again have to push out dead babies but he will forever push up daisies. This reversal of fertility in the form of imposed rot is a powerful assertion of agency. Where her fertility was consumed, he is decomposed as she is freed of him and, in a bizarre twist, he becomes more potently fertile as a corpse than she is alive.

Criticism surrounding the story tends to foreground the otherness of the violent woman, sensationalising her violence and, in turn, naturalising the violence enacted on her by the men in the story. Hankin argues that the murder's conditions are caused by a universal hatred of men, which could cause a reproduction of the crime, arguing that the woman "harbours an hostility towards men which might cause her to strike again" (75). Anne Lohead similarly gestures towards misandrist impulses under the pressures of patriarchal violence, arguing that "the angel in the house — has become a demon" (120). I believe that we must instead understand the murder as being an act of survival in its reversal of the finite consumption of fertility, in order to avoid sensationalising patriarchal and colonial violence. The woman should not be reduced to a "figure of fun" in textual interpretation as well as in the story (Mansfield, "Woman" 12), but should instead be understood as a dynamic character with motivations beyond a hatred of men and madness in isolation. To treat women's violence as an undoing of the natural, as atavistic, and men's violence as an inevitable product of the time and their nature is to normalise and be complicit in the latter violence.

The woman's daughter, Else, also embodies images of rot concurrently with images of fertility as a means of protecting herself from patriarchal exploitation. She is described, under the male gaze in the traveller's tent, as "a mean, undersized brat, with whitish hair, and weak

eyes. She stood, legs wide apart and her stomach protruding" (Mansfield, "Woman" 15). The suggestion of legs spread "wide apart" and of a protruding stomach mimicking pregnancy suggests fertility and an invitation to sexuality. However, in conjunction with the image of her small stature and weak eyes, these images take on a different valence. The protruding stomach is more likely to be the result of disease or issues with digestive health, which falls in the realm of decomposition. The weak eyes further speak to an instability with regard to her health and her small size speaks to malnourishment. Images of seduction and fertility become poisonous and uncanny in the figure of the child. Even her mind is seen as diseased through her drawings (Mansfield, "Woman" 17). Her mind and body, diseased and repulsive, are nonetheless left alone by the men. It is notable that she is a young girl without a father figure present, in a remote location, frequently alone with three strange men described as having a ravenous sexual appetite, and that they depart leaving her untouched. Bruce Harding proposes that Else "reads as an atavistic throwback, as though reproduction in the settler outback represents not the future but a return to a debased, marginally human past" (137). I argue instead that in reducing the character to a product of the land and framing her as "marginally human" and "debased", the patriarchal dehumanisation of the character is replicated under a colonial lens. The child's rotting does not represent an atavistic regression, but instead represents a sort of reclamation of her body by rendering it undesirable for consumption. Her name hints at the potential to escape her mother's fate, to be else, to be different, to be saved.

The female characters' deviation from traditional gender roles also works to destabilise conceptions of colonialism in the form of the colonial woman. Blankley argues that the categories of "gender, empire, and exploitation (resources and bodies)" are deeply entwined, where gender roles "provide a stable sense of identity, organized around hierarchized and 'naturally' self-evident truths" which provide "a model of unassailable national unity" (134). The women's engagement with the aesthetics of rot and fertility as a means of challenging gender roles then also does work to unsettle a colonial model of the 'new' world, where women are as fertile and welcoming as the land is imagined to be. In this way, the female body and the colonial land as objects of potential exploitation are both unsettled by images of rot. The unique animals and plants native to the land also embody the aesthetics of rot as a part of the agentic assemblage that resists both patriarchal and colonial violence.

The third woman in the story is arguably the narrator, though the narrator's gender was never revealed or identified in the initial version of the story published in 1912. This change was likely not made by Mansfield herself (Harding 136). The resistance and assertion of the woman at the store and her daughter – enacted through the embodiment of the aesthetics of rot and fertility – is dismantled when the narrator is edited to be female. As a woman, the narrator becomes complicit in the violence done to the woman at the store, where a third of the blame of patriarchal violence is placed onto the narrator, a woman herself. The manipulation of a genderless character into a feminine one enacts a form of metatextual patriarchal violence over the female body. Women become both perpetrators and victims of patriarchal violence in the story. Additionally, in making ambiguous the narrator's gender, Mansfield works to unsettle masculinist colonial violence by presenting the violence without the explicit depiction of masculinity. In depicting the colonial and masculine behaviour of the narrator without specifying the character as male, the relationship between masculinity and colonialism as forms of power is disrupted. In prescribing the narrator the gender of woman, this disruption of power is undone. In this editorial manipulation, the importance of gender to the embodiment of the aesthetics of rot and fertility is revealed to be essential. When the narrator is ascribed femininity without an embodiment of rot, the assertion of the other women in the text is lessened, and the resistance to masculinist colonialism is made null.

Scholarship engaging with this text often works with the edited story, which is also used in almost all subsequent republications in collections and anthologies.¹ In analysing the original 1912 text, the only version verifiably intended by Mansfield, I differ greatly from previous scholarly analysis. Engagement with the original text allows me to identify the elements of rot and fertility that are rendered null when the narrator is gendered as female.

¹ D'Cruz and Ross, Dunbar, Hankin, Harding, and Lohead all work with this reading of the text, while Blankley acknowledges the original text in a footnote. The original text reads: "'I'll draw all of you when you're gone, and your horses and the tent, and that one' – she pointed to me – 'with no clothes on in the creek'. I looked at her where she wouldn't see me frown" (Mansfield, "Woman" 16). Here in the original, the pronoun "she" refers to Else. The passage was edited so that the sentence "I looked at her where she couldn't see me frown" is included in the quotation marks. The word "frown" is changed to "from", so that the pronoun "her" refers to the protagonist.

Animal Metaphors

The animals in “The Woman at the Store” represent a significant non-human element of the agentic assemblage. In the story, the use of unconventional animal metaphors challenges the conventional interpretation of the animal as referent, rendering the subject of the metaphor an absent referee. Carol Adams notes that animals become absent referents in metaphor when the metaphor’s meaning is derived from the animal’s essentialised and universalised traits, as well as its reference to the metaphor’s subject (60). To say that an individual “is a lamb” is to use the figure of the animal as almost metonymic for a universalized trait – in this case, innocence. The actual animal itself is absented from the metaphor. However, if the false homogeny of the animal subject is challenged, so too is its erasure. When the animal metaphor strays from typical symbolism (e.g. a lamb means innocence), the animal as an absent referent becomes present in the metaphor as the reader attempts to derive meaning from the metaphor based on the animal’s known traits, instead turning the subject of the metaphor into an absent subject of reference. If the person described as a lamb is not innocent, then what is it about the lamb that the person is being likened to? The lamb becomes more important as a referent than the person does as a referee, where the lamb becomes the ambiguous point of comparison against which the person is judged. Though the livestock in the story are literally fertile in terms of their ability to be consumed as meat and labour, this fertility is challenged through unconventional metaphor.

The story begins with three characters riding through the New Zealand bush on pack horses, an animal species homogenously symbolic for strength and virility. Blankley asserts that the mobility of the characters “places them in the masculinist settler tradition”, where the horse acts as a consumable tool for masculinity through mobility (136). However, the narrator’s specific packhorse is “sick — with a big, open sore rubbed under the belly” (Mansfield, “Woman” 10). The rotting sore at the site of the stomach mirrors the infertility of the woman at the store, who has been the victim of multiple miscarriages prompted by repeated unwilling impregnation by her husband. Poi, the name of the horse, is a traditional Māori dance performed by women and means “ball” (referring to a spherical object involved in the dance) in Māori, further invoking images of pregnancy and femininity in the female horse (Huata and Papesch 12). The homogenous group of virile/fertile pack horses is then disrupted by this singular horse’s deviation from conventional interpretation in its rot and unusability, and the horse aligns itself instead with the rot and infertility of the woman at the

store. The link between the consumption of the horse as a site of fertility and the woman's sexual fertility is further continued when the narrator asks the woman for embrocation because the horse has "rubbed herself to hell!" (Mansfield, "Woman" 12). This masturbatory image further likens the using up of the horse to the sexual using up of the woman, while blaming both for the harm they experience. The similar exploitation and destruction wrought upon the horse and the woman demonstrate the relationship between 'using up' both labour and sexuality, where sexuality becomes a kind of labour. Instead of aligning itself with male power and conquest, the packhorse quietly aligns itself with female rot.

The woman is likened again to an animal when Jo asks, "[w]hat's the old bitch got in the store?" (Mansfield, "Woman" 14), in which animals are exploited figuratively within a patriarchal system of violence as the figure of the dog is weaponised to depict the woman as subservient. The woman's fertility is not only identified by her sexuality through the word "bitch", but by her economic status through the word "store". Originally, the vulgarism "bitch" defined a high sexual desire similar to a dog in heat, likening female sexuality to animal fertility (Kleinman et al. 51). The double metaphor reveals the modes of fertility the character intends to exploit – the woman and her store. Pamela Dunbar contends that the woman is presented as a series of male fantasies, of "the dolly bird" and "the provider", and that when "sex is regarded as a commodity the two roles become one: the Woman is as open to appropriation as her goods; her body itself, a store" (47–48). The economic and sexual exploitation of the woman are deeply linked under patriarchal consumption, so that the woman becomes at once animal and product. However, like the comparison to the pack horse, this perceived fertility and abundance is revealed to be inaccurate. The woman is no more fertile than her store is plentiful. In a colonial context, female reproduction is valued as necessary for the production of a 'new' nation, while the store is a capitalist venture that also supports this production. In the failure of both the woman and the store to fulfill their promises of fertility, they fail both a colonial and a patriarchal imperative. Though the assumption of sexual and economic fertility is revealed to be false through unconventional metaphor, it allows the woman and her store to be removed from consideration in patriarchal and colonial frameworks that would consume their fertility.

The woman herself employs an animal metaphor that deceptively implies fertility as a means of entrapment. When describing her anguish at her husband's absence, she says to Jo, who "made sheep's eyes at her": "It's the loneliness ... and bein' shut up 'ere like a broody 'en"

(Mansfield, "Woman" 17). In addition to signalling the woman's isolation and reflective nature, the term "broody" can also define something "apt or fit to breed" ("Broody"). It similarly evokes the word 'brood', often used to refer to a group of animals. The double meaning of the word and its allusion to animalistic breeding allow the woman to signal a false fertility to lure Jo, where an animal metaphor is wielded as a tool. In the subsequent animal metaphor of the "sheep's eyes", Jo is likened to a female animal associated with innocence, creating a moment of patriarchal disruption. This metaphor would suggest him to be feminine, docile, and innocent – traits that are canonically inaccurate. As he does not follow the common metaphorical signification of the sheep, the sheep becomes centered and he becomes an absent referee. If he is not innocent, then the other animalistic associations of a sheep are adopted – he takes on its blindness and its willingness to follow, epitomised when he encourages his companions to leave him behind (Mansfield, "Woman" 19). As the story ends with the store disappearing with a bend in the road, ominously erasing Jo and the woman at the store, it could be interpreted that Jo may be the woman's next blind and willing victim, a lamb to the slaughter (Mansfield, "Woman" 19).

Plants as Symbols

In "The Woman at the Store", plants act both as indicators of geographical fertility and symbols which reveal figurative dualisms and tensions within systems of power. While plants symbolise fertile land and growth, they also reveal modes of decay such as poverty, death, and masculine violence through their symbolism. Angela Smith notes the importance of plants in Mansfield's stories, dating back to "Enna Blake", a story she wrote when she was nine, which, "like so much of Mansfield's later fiction ... pivots on plants" (*Katherine Mansfield* 1). Revealing Mansfield's innovative use of plant symbolism, Sharon Gordon further argues that "in order to evoke 'the sense of novelty and strangeness' in her floral narratives, Mansfield subverts the sentimental metaphoric association of women and flowers in order to indicate something darker, more subversive, even transgressive" (129). In the nineteenth century, books about the language of flowers which focused on a symbolic approach were incredibly popular. To deploy an analysis of the symbolism of the plants in order to establish their role in the agentive assemblage in "The Woman at the Store", I use Kate Greenaway's *The Language of Flowers* (1834), as it is the most contemporary to Mansfield's text and one she was likely familiar with due to her personal love of botany, as well as her frequent use of flower coded symbolism.

Walking up the garden path to the store, the narrator observes that it “was planted on both sides with cabbages ... of flowers there were double poppies and sweet-williams” (Mansfield, “Woman” 12). In the garden, the plants are cultivated for their consumption as food or aesthetic objects. Notably, these three plants require fertile soil, signalling both the fertility of the actual plants and that of the land they inhabit (“Sweet William”; “Cabbages”; “Poppies”). However, these plants are also non-native to New Zealand, and so the fertility of the individual plants are alien to the fertility of the soil that allows for their growth (*Department of Conservation*). This alienation mirrors the titular woman’s alienation from her daughter, who was born of her own body and yet incongruent with it. While the plants in the garden indicate fertile grounds, the relationship is not natural or harmonious. It is likely that the land has been manipulated to make it more fertile through pH changes, tilling, watering, and importing foreign soil. This symbolic violence to the land for the sake of fertility mirrors the woman’s impregnations: the land itself too is pregnant with things it does not want and is not suited to carry.

A symbolic analysis of these plants as signifiers for fertility reveals tensions present as modes of decay in the story. In Victorian flower language, cabbages signify wealth because their coloring resembles money (Greenaway 11). However, these plants are rarely associated with wealth — in fact, they have, since the medieval period, been a staple for lower classes since they are relatively easy to grow in home gardens, which were not then taxed, and were easily stored for the winter (“Vegetables”). This symbolic tension between wealth and poverty is mirrored in the economic disparity of the woman in the store. While dilapidated and impoverished, both the house and the woman at the store have independent economic potential, a rare occurrence for a woman in a colonial setting. However, her poverty acts as a mode of decay: as the house slowly rots without repairs, she and her daughter rot along with it (Mansfield, “Woman” 15-16). This tension between economic potential and desperation results at once in her ability to provide for and entrap the travellers and the desperation that leads her to attempt that entrapment.

Poppies enact a similar tension between symbolic interpretations. In Victorian flower language, poppies represent pleasure and love, as well as remembrance and death depending on the color (Greenaway 33), which is unspecified in Mansfield’s text. The co-existence of love and death is evident in the woman’s murder of her husband. This ambiguity with regard to colour allows the poppies to hold the potential to act as a warning for violence or for love.

Adding further ambiguity, the poppies in the text are double poppies, or *Papaver paeoniflorum*, a variety known as the peony poppy (Pierce). In Victorian flower language, peonies represent shame (Greenaway 32), a third layer of symbolism that casts further friction between the first two interpretations: does the woman feel shame for her amorous liaisons, or for her violence? The text's refusal to identify color and its choice of a unique variety of poppy transform the somewhat commonplace symbol of the poppy into a representation rife with ambiguity, blurring the boundary between desire, violence, and shame.

Finally, sweet williams are strongly associated in Victorian flower language with gallantry, bravery, and masculinity (Greenaway 39). These flowers appear again inside the house in a "light bouquet of sweet-williams on the table" (Mansfield, "Woman" 16), troubling the barrier between interiority and exteriority. The men in the story, present like the three travellers or absent like the woman's husband, are a far cry from the ideals of gallantry and bravery. The inclusion of sweet williams in the garden and in the house represents a literally home-grown version of non-violent masculinity, a reclamation of gallantry and bravery as female traits, a vegetable replacement for the masculine brutality the woman has experienced. It also highlights masculinity and patriarchy as modes of decay. The ambiguity regarding plant symbolism, which signals fertility in the form of wealth, love, and masculinity, also reveals a dual nature to these concepts, signalling the house and its gardens as being an uncanny site for unstable fertility.

To conclude, "The Woman at the Store" renders ambiguous the boundary between rot and fertility in order to catalyse a shift from finite consumption to decomposition of fertility. This agency is enabled by an assemblage: of women's bodies which embrace rot as a means of avoiding exploitation, animals which defy conventional depictions of fertility, and the dual interpretations of plant symbolism and function which destabilise the certainty of fertility. These elements in conjunction achieve a greater agency in their assemblage than as disparate elements, allowing them to challenge patriarchal and colonial consumption of fertility. In the intersection between the female body and the colonial body as sites for the exploitation of fertility, I identify agency as a collective enterprise of human and non-human agents, who enact resistance through the aesthetics of rot that is generative of agency.

Works Cited

- Adams, Carol J. "Chapter Two: The Rape of Animals, the Butchering of Women". *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 58–82.
- Alpers, Antony. *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*. The Viking Press, 1980.
- Bennett, Jane. "The Agency of Assemblages". *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 20–38.
- Blankley, Elyse. "Gendered Violence and Narrative Complicity in Katherine Mansfield and Leonard Woolf: 'The Woman at the Store' and 'A Tale Told by Moonlight'". *Katherine Mansfield: International Approaches*, edited by Janka Kascakova et al., Routledge, 2021, pp. 131–42.
- "Broody - Etymology, Origin & Meaning". *Etymonline*, www.etymonline.com/word/broody.
- "Causes & Prevalence". *Miscarriage Matters New Zealand*, <https://www.miscarriagematters.org.nz/what-is-a-miscarriage>.
- D'Cruz, Doreen, and John Ross. *The Lonely and the Alone: The Poetics of Isolation in New Zealand Fiction*. Rodopi, 2011.
- Dunbar, Pamela. *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories*. St. Martin's Press, 1977.
- Gordon, Sharon. "'If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness': The Political Language of Flowers in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party and Other Stories*". *Katherine Mansfield and The Garden Party and Other Stories*, edited by Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 127–39.
- Greenaway, Kate. *Kate Greenaway's Language of Flowers*. George Routledge and Sons, 1884.
- Harding, Bruce. "Mansfield, Misogyny and Murder: 'Ole Underwood', 'The Woman at the Store' and 'Millie' Revisited". *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1988, pp. 119–36.
- Hankin, Cherry. *Katherine Mansfield and Her Confessional Stories*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1983.

- "How To Grow And Care For Sweet William". *BBC Gardeners World Magazine*, 2024, www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/grow-plants/how-to-grow-and-care-for-sweet-william/.
- "How to Grow Cabbages". *RHS Guide*, 3 Dec. 2025, www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/cabbages/grow-your-own.
- "How To Grow Poppies". *BBC Gardeners World Magazine*, 2019, www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/grow-plants/how-to-grow-poppies/.
- Huata, Ngamoni, and Te Rita Bernadette Papesch. *The Rhythm and Life of Poi*. Harper Collins, 2000.
- Kleinman, Sherryl, et al. "Reclaiming Critical Analysis: The Social Harms of 'Bitch'". *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009, pp. 47–68.
- Lochead, Anne. "A Corpse Planted in the Garden: The Buried Body in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Woman at the Store' and Elizabeth Knox's *Dreamhunter Duet*." *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, vol. 2, no. 35, 2017, pp. 114–30.
- "Make Sheep's Eyes At." *Collins English Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/make-sheeps-eyes-at.
- Mansfield, Katherine. *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Letters*. Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, Oxford Paperbacks, 1990.
- . "The Woman at the Store." *Selected Stories: Katherine Mansfield*, edited by Angela Smith, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 10–19.
- Mark, Allan. "Tussock Grasslands". *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2009, teara.govt.nz/en/grasslands/page-1.
- New Zealand Government. "Native Plants". *Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai*, www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-plants/.
- O'Sullivan, Vincent. "The Magnetic Chain: Notes and Approaches to K.M." *Landfall*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1975.
- Pierce, Shelley. "Double Poppy Info: Learn About Growing Double Flowering Poppies". *Gardening Know How*, 6 Mar. 2018, www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/flowers/poppy/growing-double-poppies.html.

Pollock, Kerryn. "Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Care – Childbirth, 19th Century to 1950s". *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2011, teara.govt.nz/en/pregnancy-birth-and-baby-care/page-3.

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. 1758, www.proquest.com/books/antony-cleopatra-1758/docview/2138574611/se-2.

Smith, Angela. "A Common Certain Understanding". *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 31–62.

---. *Katherine Mansfield: A Literary Life*. Palgrave, 2000.

"Vegetables in the Middle Ages: From Cabbages to Cardoons." *Medievalists.Net*, 4 June 2025, www.medievalists.net/2025/06/vegetables-in-the-middle-ages/.

Wazana Tompkins, Kyla, and Melissa Sanchez. "Deformalism, Decomposition, Rot: Deviant Aesthetics at the End of Legibility". *The Routledge Companion to Queer Literary Studies*, Routledge, 2025, pp. 138–52.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Spooks, Phantoms, and Blossoming Corpses: Corporeality in the Early Combatant Poetry of the First World War
Author	Dr. Isabel Fee Schueler
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Spooks, Phantoms, and Blossoming Corpses: Corporeality in the Early Combatant Poetry of the First World War

Dr. Isabel Fee Schueler
University of Edinburgh

This article traces different patterns within the early English combatant poetry of the First World War, specifically in the poems of Charles Sorley, Roland Leighton, Robert Graves, and Ivor Gurney. These poems strikingly often feature phantoms, spooks, and wraiths, suggesting a disconnect between body and spirit. At the same time, there is also a strong connection between corpses and flowers, the rotting of the human body and the regrowth and regenerative ability of the natural world. And as the human body is turned into a corpse, its spirit not only reappears in ghostly form but is also subsumed into material objects. The poets use these transformations to show the war's physical and mental impact on the soldiers. As the analysis of patterns and parallels surrounding corporeality, spirituality, and materiality shows, the early combatant poetry of the war redistributes personhood across damaged bodies, spectral figures, and material objects.

Elizabeth Vandiver points out that the “early poetry of the war, far from consisting only of simplistic glorifications of the ‘nation’s cause’, included a variety of complicated and nuanced positions. In the early years, as later, there was nothing simple or monolithic about First World War poetry” (78-79). This article sets out to recover some of that nuance in the early poetry of the First World War, by focussing on a collection of poems written across the year 1915 and enquiring how they redistribute personhood across damaged bodies, spectral figures, and material objects. The poems from this time often feature phantoms, spooks, and wraiths, suggesting a dislocation of the spirit from the body. At the same time, there is also a strong connection between corpses and flowers, the rotting of the human body and the regrowth and regenerative ability of the natural world. And as the human body is turned into a corpse, its spirit (defined as the immaterial aspect of a person, its soul or personhood) reappears not only in ghostly form, but is also subsumed into material objects, such as letters, clothes, identity discs, and dried flowers. These poems thus ask the question whether the body is still the most appropriate carrier of personhood in a time of war, and how the relationship between body and spirit has changed because of the war.

If these phenomena could be perceived in the work of only one war poet, they could be dismissed as flukes, but there is a striking number of parallels between the poems written by the poets in the first half of the war, which suggests that the relationship between corporeality (the body), spirituality (the soul), and materiality (things and objects) in the early poetry of the war warrants a closer look. This is exactly what this article provides, and the analysis of early war poems by Charles Sorley, Roland Leighton, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, and Rupert Brooke shows how these poems increasingly call into question the body as the carrier of personhood and thus suggest the disappearance of individual identity in wartime. These early war poems convey the fractured nature of the poets' experience of war and thus speak of the physical and mental impacts of the war on the soldier in a unique way. This article zooms in on the early poetry of the war and examines how poets used imagery surrounding corporeality, spirituality, and materiality to describe alienation, death, and grief at a time when more direct criticism of the war was difficult.

Part One: Blossoming Corpses

Rupert Brooke's war sonnets dominated the contemporary public perception of poetry since their publication in the spring of 1915, as "the atmosphere of 1915 demanded heroes, and Brooke, with his youth and his beauty and his poetry, was a symbol that everyone could grasp" (Martin 169). But at the same time, the poetry written by soldiers on active service at the height of Brooke's fame in 1915 already depicts what Santanu Das calls one of "the classic features of First World War poetry: the lyric testimony of the broken body – mouth, eyes, the 'gashed' head" (4). The "gashed head" (line 6) which Das mentions appears in Charles Sorley's "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead", written in October 1915, a poem which also describes the soldiers as "deaf" (line 5) and having "blind eyes" (line 7). The soldiers' bodies are no longer whole, and in fact, the body parts of the "millions of the mouthless" (line 1) all blur together into one "o'ercrowded mass" (line 11). Sorley's poem is only one example of how the poetry of this time already depicts the body either in parts or in mutilated form, relatively early in the conflict. Another example is Robert Graves' poem "The Morning before the Battle", written in June 1915, which draws up the image of a "head all battered in by violent blows" (line 10), a sight which makes the speaker feel the taste of "clotted blood" (line 11). And even in Roland Leighton's "Violets", written in April 1915, we are introduced first to

the “soaked blood” (line 4) and “head” (line 5) of the soldier’s “mangled body” (line 11), seeing him splintered and maimed rather than whole. All three poems were written across 1915, which shows that “what we now regard as [one of] the classic features of the First World War poetry” (Das 4) did not start with Owen or Sassoon, and the body is already broken in the early war poetry written by soldiers on active service at the time. In these poems, the soldier’s body bears the wounds and scars of the war, has been fractured by the experience of active service, and is very rarely still associated with wholeness.

Whenever the body *does* feature as a whole rather than individual limbs or broken body-parts, it is in the form of corpses, and, more often than not, these corpses are connected to the natural world around them in some way. This leads to the existence of a curious collection of blossoming corpses in early combatant poetry, as some examples will highlight: the corpse of the dead soldier in Roland Leighton’s “Violets” lies in a bed of violets, which “grow / where his mangled body lay” (lines 10-11), leading to the violets both “hiding horror from the day” (line 12) and becoming symbols for the horror itself. The poem plays with the violet not only as a flower but also as a colour, the combination of the “red” (line 4) blood of the soldier and the “blue” (line 3) of the flower’s petals, thus further blurring the lines between the corpse and the flower. Violets are also the flowers which are used in Ivor Gurney’s poem “To His Love” to cover up the corpse of his of his dead friend, whose lover he instructs to “cover him over / with Violets” (line 13-14). The demand is repeated with an urgency that suggests that the flowers as symbols of nature’s ability for growth might cover up not just the corpse itself but also its inevitable decay: “Cover him, cover him soon! / And with thick set / Masses of memoried flowers” (lines 16-18). The second of Charles Sorley’s “Two Sonnets” also uses the language of plants – “withered long and sped / Is touched, stirs, rises, opens and grows sweet / And blossoms” (lines 12-14) – to show what happens to the body “when you are dead” (line 14), thus pointing out the earthly quality of a dead body that both decays and fertilises the growth of flowers. And last but not least, Robert Graves’ “The Morning Before the Battle” closes with the image of “dead men blossom[ing] in the garden-close” (line 14). The number of examples suggests that many of the poets recognised the juxtaposition of decay and regeneration as a powerful lyrical device to show the absurdity of the war’s contrasts and the strangeness of its reality. The poems use flowers to commemorate, conceal, aestheticise, or identify bodily horror. Especially early on in the war, when more explicit and critical depictions

of the war's character were not a common feature in the war poetry available to the public, the juxtaposition of the broken body or rotting corpse with the beautiful and regenerative wholeness of flowers and natural imagery functioned as a way to nevertheless poetically communicate the paradoxical and gruesome reality of trench warfare to those at home struggling to comprehend it.

The fracturing of bodies and their transformation into corpses in poetry show the bleak reality of the war, but it is in the connection to the natural world that the blossoming corpses also suggest a more hopeful perspective. Paul Fussell explains through the example of Charles Sorley how many soldiers experienced the corporeality of death: "for the poet Charles Sorley the transformation of man into corpse is a three-part action. First man; then, when hit, animal, writhing and thrashing in articulate agony and making horrible snoring noises; then a 'thing'" (136). The body, as a corpse, is severed from its previous function of sustaining life, and as a consequence, the corpse is no longer a person, but a thing, just like objects become things "when they stop working" (Brown 4). The same view of a corpse as no longer a person, disconnected from its function as a body and from the spirit it once hosted, but only as a 'thing' can be seen in Gurney's poem "To His Love" where the corpse is described as "that red wet / Thing I must somehow forget" (lines 19-20). But the images of the corpses when connected to the natural world allow for a more hopeful view of death, as the body mass of the corpse becomes part of the natural world and thus gains a new function. The transformation from man to animal and eventually to thing is not framed as necessarily a negative development when it allows the corpse to gain the regenerative qualities of the natural world. The soldier may be dead, but his corpse can still nourish the soil and the natural world, and thereby lead to the growth of new life, and even beauty, as the connection to particularly flowers, blooms, and blossoms suggest. This bestows a peculiar new purpose and value onto the soldier's death, and highlights that while the body may be broken, it can still have a positive effect on the natural world, becoming fertiliser for new growth and life, and thus claim a new function. Death and decay are transformed into new life, flowers, and beauty, as the corpse is subsumed into the natural cycle of the seasons, and the image of the blossoming corpse contains not only the war's absurdity but also a more hopeful view of what happens to the body after death. The soldier's body may be broken, but he can nevertheless regain wholeness as his corpse becomes part of the natural world.

Part Two: Spooks and Phantoms

When personhood is no longer stored in the body, it becomes unrecognisable, and as a consequence many poets also turned to ghosts and phantoms to convey the uncanny experience of alienation between the body and its spirit, as individual personality is dislocated and suddenly roams freely, appearing in other, often spectral forms. The connection between personhood, individuality, and ghostly apparitions thus warrants a closer look, especially given the numerous invocations of spirits and spooks in the early writing of the First World War, which suggests that poets were trying to give a different form to the soul. Charles Sorley's poetry shows very clearly that war, death, and the loss of individual identity are intertwined. His poetry depicts how "death has made all his for evermore" ("When You See Millions" line 14) and at the same time how everyone, "[v]ictor and vanquished, ... coward and brave: friend, foe" ("Two Sonnets" lines 7-8), is "a-one in death" ("Two Sonnets" line 7). Sorley's poetry shows that while one goes to war as a soldier, with allegiances and individual characteristics, opinions and aspirations, all of this is slowly eradicated by military life and eventual death. Helen McCartney explains that "the nature of trench warfare, and the randomness and horrific nature of the death and maiming many soldiers witnessed, compounded a feeling of a lack of individual control over their own destiny" (301-302) and Trevor Royle highlights the effect this had on Sorley, who "admitted that the constant casualties and the sight of mutilated men had gnawed at his humanity, leaving an empty shell" (43). Sorley realised it was not just bodies that were mutilated and killed at war, but that his own humanity, spirit, and personality were also casualties of the war. His poem "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" no longer shows individuals, but the dead as a group of millions who have become one indistinguishable "o'vercrowded mass" (line 11). Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer analyse the poem as showing how "death nullifies the individual, not [just] by rendering him a part of a greater whole ..., but by making him anonymous" (34). There is no more individuality in war and death as "none wears the face you knew" (line 12) and individuality has been replaced by anonymity and non-recognition.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the experience and writing of Roland Leighton. He left for active service in the spring of 1915 but over the course of the year became increasingly disillusioned and depressed, losing his creativity and the will to connect

with loved ones at home. His fiancée, Vera Brittain, expressed her frustration with this change clearly in a letter to Leighton:

You admit yourself that you are 'stiff, narrowed, practical, an incipient martinet;' and the characteristics hardly seem to invoke the summit of ambition of the real you. But the war kills other things besides physical life, and I sometimes feel that little by little the Individuality of **You** is being as surely buried as the bodies are of those who lie beneath the trenches of Flanders and France (Brittain, *Letter*, original emphasis).

Brittain here points to the exact circumstances Sorley expresses in his poetry: after months of trench life, it was not just Leighton's body that had become worn out, but the characteristics that made up Leighton's "personality of pre-war days" (Leighton, *Letter* 7 Sep 1915) had also started to disappear. The parallel to Sorley also appears in Leighton's final poem, "Hédauville", written after he received Brittain's letter. While in his previous poems, there had always been a first-person speaker, set in clear relationship to the addressed "you", the speaker's voice in "Hédauville" is unembodied, and there is no trace of his personality or identity, other than a vague and intangible mention of "the boy you used to know" (line 13), which stands in a curious parallel to Sorley's mention of "one face that you loved heretofore" (line 12) in "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" and even Gurney's exclamation that "[y]ou would not know him now" ("To His Love" line 11) conveys the same idea of a personality that has vanished, become unrecognisable or has been lost. Individual personality is a thing of the past and it can only be spoken of in the past tense in poetry, as the war slowly obliterates the soldier's "personality of pre-war days" (Leighton, *Letter* 7 Sep 1915). Sorley, Leighton, and Brittain all seemed to recognise in the autumn months of 1915 that individuality and humanity were two intangible and thus often overlooked casualties of the war.

While bodies and individuality were disappearing, another phenomenon started to appear in the war writing of soldiers on active service: ghosts, phantoms, spectres, and visions. Robert Graves' poem "The Morning Before the Battle" features the frightful apparition of both a personified "Death" (line 6) which "blighted every beauty with chill breath" (line 8) and the speaker's own "wraith" (line 9) standing before him with "[h]is head all battered in by violent blows" (line 10). The speaker calls the apparition "my wraith" (line 9) and the sight of it turns the "fruit between [his] lips to clotted blood" (line 11) and scares the speaker to tears. The wraith, though non-corporeal, allows the speaker's own mental injury to become visible

within the space of the poem. Roland Leighton's poem "Hédauville" features a mysterious "Stranger" (line 11) who is a better, "less proud ... and worthier" (line 14) version of the speaker and thus turns the speaker into a kind of shadow version of himself, a ghostlike phantom that one can no longer be sure was ever real. Leighton's letters to Vera Brittain support this interpretation, as he "wonder[s] sometimes if you get tired of talking to a phantom in the void who does not answer" (*Letter* 18 Jul 1915) and even asks her, "[d]o I seem very much of a phantom in the void to you?" (*Letter* 17 Nov 1915) a few months later. He, too, clearly saw himself increasingly as a phantom, a sentiment which is reflected in his poem written in late November 1915. Charles Sorley's work also features ghostly apparitions, most obviously in "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead", which has both a personified "Great death" (line 14) that "has made all his for evermore" (line 14) and "a spook" (line 13) that haunts the speaker's beloved, an imprint of the "face [she] knew" (line 13). And even Rupert Brooke's final poem, posthumously titled "Fragment" and written by the poet on route to Gallipoli shortly before his death, features "[p]erishing things and strange ghosts" (line 18), which pass "[t]o other ghosts – this one, or that, or I" (line 19). Kenneth Sherman explains that "[i]n this last poem, abandoning his place of privilege, ... Brooke reaches out to touch suffering humanity [and] intuit[s] that the desolation created by the Great War will turn the self, the 'I', into a phantom" (544). The speaker here does not only identify "his friends" (line 3) as the ghosts, but also himself, echoing Sorley's poem's statement that they are all the same in death or in the expectation of imminent death and exist more as ghosts than in embodied form.

When considered alongside Leighton's and Sorley's treatment of the eradication of personality, humanity, and individuality as a consequence of continued war service, the appearance of all these ghosts and phantoms turns them into a kind of premonition for the death of a soldier's individuality that goes in line with the anonymity of death itself. All the characteristics that have made up a person's self slowly start to disappear and become subsumed into the ghostly apparitions, while the speakers and poets themselves exist as shadow-versions of their former selves. These ghosts are disconnected from their previous selves, anonymous and moving "[l]ike coloured shadows, thinner than filmy glass" (Brooke, "Fragment" line 15) as one "o'ercrowded mass" (Sorley, "When You See Millions" line 11). The poems featuring ghosts and phantoms thus make use of what J.M. Winter calls "the

poetic motif of the dead among the living" (213). In these poems, "the living are half dead, and the dead half alive; both in a liminal world" (213) and it is as if their spirits have already crossed over into the afterlife; while their bodies remain, they are merely shadows, ghosts, spirits, phantoms of their former selves, empty of the soul of the individual which has already gone. The speakers in "Hédauville", "The Morning Before the Battle", and "Fragment" all anticipate their own imminent deaths, and as their poems show, their deaths have already happened in the spiritual sense, as they are only phantoms wandering the earth, but no longer belonging to it. The appearance of the ghosts in these early war poems can thus be seen as a way for the poets to draw attention to the way the war slowly destroys the soldier's spirit, a process that happens before the body is killed. Robert Graves uses the term "these soul-deadening trenches" (line 9) in his poem "1915", which expresses the same sentiment as Vera Brittain's fear that "the war kills other things besides physical life" (Brittain, *Letter* 8 Nov 1915). The sudden appearance of ghosts, phantoms, wraiths, and spooks in the early war poems is a way for the poets to highlight the mental impact of the war on the soldiers. And this once again happens through metaphor rather than in explicit terms, as the poets found creative ways to speak the truth of their war experience in poetry.

Part Three: Objects and Memorabilia

With the body being reclaimed by the natural world as a corpse and individual personhood disappearing and roaming freely in spectral form, the question arises whether personhood can retain any sort of material presence at all. And for this question, too, the early war poets have their own answer, as material objects start to take on characteristics of the individuals, and the body is replaced as the traditional carrier of personality. So, in accordance with Bill Brown's distinction between object and thing, while the corpse becomes a thing, emptied of its function and any recognisable personhood, material objects such as letters or keepsakes gain a new function and become invested with personhood instead. The most obvious example for this is the letters which the soldiers sent home to their families during the war and which acted as stand-ins for the soldiers themselves. The correspondence between Roland Leighton and Vera Brittain was treasured by both of them while they could not meet in person, and in fact they sent hundreds of letters to each other while only spending a total of seventeen days together in the whole twenty-one months they knew each other. As

a consequence, the letters became substitutes for the person writing them, something which Leighton remarked upon in one of his letters to Vera from early September 1915: “I do wonder if I am like my letters in the same way in which you are like yours. We both seem less reserved in letters, more like our real selves” (*Letter* 2 Sep 1915). The letters, as material objects, were able to carry and convey personality when this could not be conveyed through physical presence.

The transference of personality and spirit onto material objects became even more important at the moment of the soldier’s death when his body stops being the carrier of his spirit. In this moment, the body becomes the corpse, and the object becomes the memento. Leighton described the phenomenon in another letter to Vera Brittain: “One of my men has just been killed – the first. I have been taking the things out of his pockets and tying them round in his handkerchief to be sent back somewhere to someone who will see more than a torn letter, and a pencil, and a knife and a piece of shell” (*Letter* 9 May 1915). The soldier’s life is encompassed in these objects, and at the point of his death, they take on a new meaning by carrying his personality now that his body no longer can, literally becoming “more than a torn letter, and a pencil, and a knife and a piece of shell” (Leighton, *Letter* 9 May 1915). Almost the exact same procedure is described in the second of Charles Sorley’s “Two Sonnets”, which describes death as “an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean, / A merciful putting away of what has been” (lines 2-3). It is a practical, matter-of-fact way of describing what happens at the point of death, not to the body of the soldier, but to his things, as his spirit is somehow transferred from one to the other. The identity of the soldier is marked in the physical objects that remain of him after his death, objects that remind us “of what has been” (line 3), thus containing some essence of the soldier’s life and spirit still within them. This also compares with Wilfred Owen’s first poem written on active service, “With an Identity Disc”, written almost two years later and conveying the same idea. “With an Identity Disc” transfers the dead soldier’s spirit and personality onto the identity disc that is sent home to his loved ones after his death. The speaker asks for his “death [to] be memoried on this disc” (line 11) and for his “sweet friend” (line 12) to “Wear it” (line 12) so that “thy heart-beat [may] kiss it night and day” (line 13). The three poets point to the ability of objects to become more than their mass after a soldier’s death, and likewise to the soldier’s ability to contain his personality and spirit within the material objects, thus allowing it to live on. Whether it is letters, an empty pail, or a pencil

and a piece of shell, the moment of a soldier's death is the moment when these objects replace the body as the host and carrier of the soldier's spirit and identity.

This phenomenon is not only observed in the poems of the time, but also played out in real life countless times, as the soldiers' bodies were buried abroad but their kit was sent back to their relatives and became the only material thing that was left of the dead. Both Charles Sorley and Roland Leighton died in France, in October and December of 1915 respectively, and both of their families received their belongings a few weeks afterwards. Emily Brayshaw explains that "Leighton's uniform ... was still filthy, shredded by bullet holes, covered in trench mud and soaked with his blood; a horrific relic that traumatised his loved ones" (40). Vera Brittain's diary records her reaction: "All the sepulchres and catacombs of Rome could not make me realise mortality & decay & corruption as vividly as the smell of those clothes" (*Chronicle* 336). The materiality of the returned objects, their smell, texture, state of dirtiness, and destruction could help families understand the reality of the soldiers' deaths in new and horrible ways, and many found the experience extremely distressing. There is a distinction in many relatives' reactions, however, between objects that were burned or buried and objects that were kept and treasured. Interestingly, the clothes worn on the soldier's body acted as proof of the soldier's death and were thus burned or buried, while other items such as letters, pens, notebooks, knives or perfume bottles functioned as reminders of the soldier's life and were thus more often kept. Vera Brittain, for example, kept Leighton's letters and found his poems within "a private exercise book" (Bishop and Bostridge 213), and Charles Sorley's family only discovered his final poem "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" in his notebook when his kit was returned to them. While the bodies were buried and no longer accessible to the grieving families, the objects carried a sense of the person their owner had been. Vera Brittain went from worshipping Leighton's person, to worshipping his letters while he was at the front, to worshipping his poetry after he had died. And she kept the violets which he had sent her from the front in the spring of 1915 in a necklace that she wore for the rest of her life. The progression shows a move from corporeality to materiality, and serves as another example of how material objects could take on the functions previously held by the soldier's body as carriers of personality, especially after his death.

Coda: Corporeality, Spirituality, Materiality

As this article has shown, the study of the early poetry of the First World War reveals some curious parallels between poets who were writing at the same time, but unbeknownst to each other. While the public celebrated the enthusiastic, heroic war poetry by figures such as Julian Grenfell and Rupert Brooke, war poets on active service such as Charles Sorley, Roland Leighton, Ivor Gurney, and Robert Graves were writing a very different kind of poetry. With only war-positive poems distributed and celebrated in the public eye, there was “a lack of suitable models” (Moorcroft Wilson 113) for poets to express war-critical attitudes or convey feelings of unhappiness, homesickness, or self-alienation. But the poets on active service in 1915 nevertheless found their own ways of conveying the truth of their war experience, often using strikingly similar metaphors and concepts surrounding corporeality, identity, death, and decay. Many of the poems place the body within the natural world to show its separation from the spirit or the soul of the person it belonged to. Many of the poems also feature spirits, phantoms, wraiths, and spooks to show the mental impact of active service on soldiers. And many of the poems show that in the face of the body’s fracturing, personhood can be transferred onto objects instead, especially after the person has been killed. When read in symphony, these early war poems convey the sense that the war has rendered the body an inadequate host of personality and that it has dislocated personhood from the body: the bodies are broken and mutilated and turned into corpses. The spirit of the soldier, his individual personality, has to appear in other forms, as phantoms and wraiths, or is contained in material objects instead. This explains the plentiful appearance of ghosts and spooks in these early war poems, as they are visual representations of the separation between body and spirit, and show the spirit as detached from the body, especially when that body has become a corpse. But it also adds to our understanding of material culture and remembrance, as memorabilia and material objects such as violets, letters and poems act as new and alternative hosts for a soldier’s spirit and identity after his body has been rendered incapable of fulfilling this function. The early war poetry under consideration in this article, thus, shows how the body is replaced as the primary carrier of personhood and how the war sets up the development from corporeality towards spirituality and eventually to materiality.

Death, then, plays an interesting role within the constellation of corporality, spirituality and materiality, as it constitutes the moment when the personality and spirit of a person get irrevocably detached from the body and subsumed into other things, both tangible such as

objects and intangible such as memory or spirits. Thus, the body returns to the earth, becoming mass and fertiliser for the natural world and its flowers, while the spirit returns to the loved ones of the dead in the form of physical objects and memorabilia. And the role of the poetry here becomes especially important when we consider the anonymity of death in wartime, and how the poems remain as testaments of individuality and personality after “Great death has made all his for evermore” (Sorley, “When You See Millions” line 14). They defy the anonymity of death by becoming alternative embodiments of the poet’s spirit, a material and immaterial reminder of the person who wrote them, thus allowing the poets to retain or reclaim their individuality. As Jane Potter states, “more than any historical tome or stone monument, the memory of the dead, refracted through many different lenses, is enshrined in poetry” (28). Within the poems of the dead, some part of the poets’ spirit, personality, and character lives on and their experience and essence are preserved long after their bodies have been buried.

These early poems already show the different effects of the war on the soldiers, but they do so indirectly rather than explicitly as the later poems of Owen and Sassoon. We see mutilated, mangled, and broken bodies; we see rotting corpses, clotted blood, gashed heads, and “millions of the mouthless dead” (Sorley, “When You See Millions” line 1), and through this we are shown the physical impact of the war on soldiers. But at the same time, we are also shown the mental impact of the war on the poets, who describe how the war turns people into phantoms and ghosts, into shadows of their former selves as they lose their individuality and personality within the “soul-deadening trenches” (Graves, “1915” line 9). The poems show the fracturing of the body and the consequent loss of its ability to store personhood, and this individuality and personhood is instead either subsumed into objects or appears in spectral form. The poems revolve around the same themes, and show the same perspective of the war, but the message is hidden behind metaphors and juxtapositions, instead of being explicitly stated as we have come to know it from later war poems such as Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est”. The critique of the war is nevertheless present in the early war poems considered in this article; it is contained within the disconnect between body and spirit, the dislocation of personhood from its traditional host, the body, and its subsequent dispersal across flesh, spectre, and object.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Alan, and Mark Bostridge, editors. *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends – Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, Geoffrey Thurlow*. Anniversary edition, Virago, 2014.
- Brayshaw, Emily. "Remembering Roland Leighton: Uniforms as the Materials of Memory and Mourning in World War I". *The Materiality of Mourning*. Routledge, 2019, pp. 40–60.
- Brittain, Vera. *Chronicle of Youth: Vera Brittain's War Diary 1913-1917*, edited by Alan Bishop, Phoenix Press, 2000.
- . *Letter to Roland Leighton*. 08 November 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 244.
- Brooke, Rupert. "Fragment". *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With A Memoir*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1918, p. 149.
- Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory". *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22.
- Das, Santanu. "Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction". *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 3–34.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Graves, Robert. "1915". *Over the Brazier*, The Poetry Bookshop London, 1916, p. 31.
- . "The Morning Before the Battle". *Over the Brazier*, The Poetry Bookshop London, 1916, p. 22.
- Gurney, Ivor. "To his Love". *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57246/to-his-love>.
- Leighton, Roland. "Hédauville". *Feuilles Mortes: Compiled in proud and loving memory of Roland Aubrey Leighton*, by Vera Brittain, 1916, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 55 D106.
- . *Letter to Vera Brittain*. 9 May 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 153.
- . *Letter to Vera Brittain*. 18 Jul 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 153.
- . *Letter to Vera Brittain*. 2 Sep 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 153.
- . *Letter to Vera Brittain*. 7 Sep 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 153.
- . *Letter to Vera Brittain*. 17 Nov 1915, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 153.
- . "Violets". *Feuilles Mortes: Compiled in proud and loving memory of Roland Aubrey Leighton*, by Vera Brittain, 1916, Vera Brittain Archive, Hamilton, Box 55 D106.

- McCartney, Helen B. "The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain". *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2014, pp. 299–315.
- Martin, Sandra. "The Literary War: From Patriotism to Cynicism". *Queens Quarterly*, vol. 122, no. 2, 2015, pp. 167–78.
- Minogue, Sally, and Andrew Palmer. *The Remembered Dead: Poetry, Memory and the First World War*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Moorcroft Wilson, Jean. *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to "Good-bye to All That" (1895-1929)*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018.
- Owen, Wilfred. "With an Identity Disc". *The Complete Poems and Fragments, Volume I: The Poems*, edited by Jon Stallworthy, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 96.
- Potter, Jane. "The Essentially Modern Attitude Toward War: English Poetry of the Great War". *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, edited by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, pp. 20–30.
- Royle, Trevor. "Literature and World War One". *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, pp. 37–49.
- Sherman, Kenneth. "Perishing Things and Strange Ghosts: Rupert Brooke's Last Poem". *Queens Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 3, 1996, pp. 533–545.
- Sorley, Charles. "Two Sonnets". *Marlborough, and other poems*, Cambridge University Press, 1916, pp. 76–7.
- . "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead". *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47427/when-you-see-millions-of-the-mouthless-dead>
- Vandiver, Elizabeth. "Early Poets of the First World War". *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 69–80.
- Winter, J. M. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	In/Visible Women: Transtemporal Black Lesbian Bodies in <i>The Watermelon Woman</i> (1996) and <i>The Mark of Liliith</i> (1986)
Author	Malissa White
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

In/Visible Women: Transtemporal Black Lesbian Bodies in *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The Mark of Lilith* (1986)

Malissa White

University of Glasgow

*This essay explores black lesbian visibility and transtemporality through *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The Mark of Lilith* (1986). Both films are self-reflexive meta-commentaries that centre black lesbian subjectivities, while also attempting to locate black lesbians in history (*The Watermelon Woman*) or in myth (*The Mark of Lilith*). I argue that the filmmakers resist the colonial gaze by employing self-reflexivity to represent themselves, engaging audiences intersubjectively in a radical act of witnessing. Further, they enter their physical bodies into myth, history, narrative present and among future audiences, rendering the black lesbian body radically visible across time. Addressing visibility from socio-political othering to the act of seeing in film phenomenology, I assert that the prevailing Eurocentric patriarchal culture constituted itself against the other by exorcising the other from visibility. As explored in spectatorship film theory, being made invisible created a critical separation between the black lesbian spectator and film narrative. That separation is also a space of radical possibility. Employing the deviant gaze theory, I argue that black lesbian spectators subvert dominant film narratives by inscribing themselves into film worlds via misreadings of film texts. This informs black lesbian filmmakers, who further radical representation through self-reflexivity and self-insertion. Close examination of the films highlights how self-reflexivity enables black lesbian film authorship. Finally, I trace how self-reflexivity engages audiences intersubjectively with the filmmakers through witnessing and testimony. The physical presence of the filmmakers fills the lacunas created by an erased queer history. Audiences bear witness to the embodied black lesbian experience.*

To be a visible black lesbian is an act of rebellion. In film, where the male-centred gaze still dominates the construction and depiction of women, the black lesbian body is further marginalised into obscurity. *The Mark of Lilith* (1986) and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) are radical examples of films that centre black lesbian subjectivities. Their landmark representations portray black women as complex and desirable, who proudly embrace their sexuality. These rebellious figures oppose the controlling images of black women so often stereotyped in film and the silence on sexuality that such images engender. Both films are

self-reflexive meta-commentaries, employing documentary-within-film aesthetics and direct-address commentary to locate queer representations in history. Existing scholarship on *The Watermelon Woman* contends that self-reflexivity acts as a cinematic mechanism, integrating the filmmaker and character, enabling authorship. However, I argue that self-reflexivity enables what I term transtemporal visibility; by collapsing the distance between filmmaker, character and subject, the filmmakers inscribe themselves into the historic and mythic lineages they recover, thus existing simultaneously in the past, filmic present and future. They prove that we, and they, have always been here.

By transtemporality, I mean existence across points in time, such as past, present and future, which I ground in Theodore Sider's theory of four-dimensionalism in metaphysics. He contends that an ordinary object, such as a human organism, persists across time as a whole object comprised of temporal parts (54-59). Those temporal parts may or may not look, behave or be identical to the whole, but they remain part of the whole (Sider 60). Jasper Lauderdale additionally references transtemporality while discussing the filmic black vampire, arguing that the black vampire collapses the past and future into an interminable present, a theory of transtemporality based in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (281). Adapting these theories as a framework, I argue that transtemporality connects the past, present and future through the filmmakers, whose identities as character and subject are temporal parts of the filmmaker's whole. Thus, the filmmaker persists across points in time.

Both films employ transtemporal visibility to recover black lesbian subjectivities erased from history and myth, radically spotlighting the taboo topics of black women's desire and sexuality. This taboo persists due to gendered racism and controlling images, such as the hypersexualised Jezebel, which reinforces the limits of acceptable behaviour as defined by the white heteropatriarchy (WHP) 'normal' while also limiting representations of black women as Other (Collins 70). These multitudinous oppressions create what Darlene Clark Hine termed a "culture of dissemblance", where black women shield their inner lives and sexuality from oppressors by silencing themselves on matters of sex and sexuality (912). Already marginalised by the WHP, black lesbians are further isolated from black heterosexual women as some black women react to any "so-called deviant individual behaviour" as "a threat to the race as a whole" (Hammonds 133). Black lesbian 'deviance'

exists within the already 'deviant' black women's sexuality, making visibility unacceptable in a pre-existing culture of silence.

This erasure doesn't negate existence; rather, it renders the black lesbian a "deviant ghostly bod[y]" (Brock and Edenborg 680). Patricia White references the 'spectral lesbian spectator' that haunts feminist film theory, disrupting the assimilated masculine perspective of female spectatorship (146). Though White's spectral lesbian spectator disrupts the assumption of maleness and heterosexuality, whiteness remains the 'normal' perspective that spectators must engage with intersubjectively. As theorised by Vivian Sobchack, intersubjectivity occurs when the viewer positions themselves within the film's world. In doing so, the viewer experiences the other's perception and experience and expresses their own perceptive experiences (142-143). However, Sobchack universalises the experience of intersubjectivity without considering how the intersectional oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality influence embodied engagement with film. Laura Mulvey directly refers to the masculinisation of the spectator regardless of the viewer's gender or orientation, which positions masculinity and whiteness as the 'normal' (29). The black lesbian spectator disrupts this positionality. While we can project ourselves into the film, we cannot communicate dialogically with it, as we cannot express our own experiences. Any intersubjectivity with a film requires choosing between blackness, queerness, or womanhood. So, we remain silenced and disembodied in the experience.

Studies on black lesbian spectatorship, though limited, attempt to close the distance between self and film. This limitation of intersubjectivity creates a gap, a potential for radical reinterpretation, imagination and opposition for black lesbian representation. bell hooks argues that marginality is a site of resistance, offering "the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" ("Choosing the Margin" 20). It is not a space of lack; instead, it opposes oppression from outside its centre and as a vital part of the whole. For black people existing at the outer edges of marginality, this oppositional gaze to white oppressive structures informs the critical separation the black spectator draws between subject and self. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators", hooks notes that this was primarily focused on race and male spectatorship, given the historic repercussions of black looking as an act of violence. Through film, black men could "enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that

mediated racial negation" (257). Black women spectators, however, did not identify with the constructions of white womanhood and the phallogentric gaze, and were able to look from a place that disrupted and deconstructed narratives. Though hooks leaves the question of the black lesbian spectator open, this doesn't imply identification with the phallogentric gaze. The black lesbian spectator's gaze is inherently political, oppositional and radical as it dares to look through the lens of female desire, imagining possibilities of lesbian intimacies beyond the objectification of the phallogentric gaze.

The black lesbian filmmaker is first a spectator. Living in the margins as black, queer and woman, we view cinema from the WHP with a critical eye, implying our existence rather than seeing representation. Imagination catalyses what Z. Isiling Nataf calls the 'deviant gaze', a theory of black lesbian spectatorship. Although inherently oppositional and critical, it also identifies with elements of the film by "radically misreading the text" (64) beyond the filmmaker's intentions. This transgressive reading offers a thrill in disrupting established norms, like the thrill horror spectators might get from viewing taboos. The black lesbian spectator, already a rebel, derives pleasure from and identifies with the rebellious or transgressive figure. They may not necessarily reflect their experience, but their transgressive behaviour suggests the possibility of queerness. Like a cult reading, the deviant gaze disrupts intentionality to engage black lesbian spectators imaginatively through these rebellious figures. The deviant gaze shrinks the distance between self and film created by the oppositional gaze by inscribing the self onto the film world that lacks it. Not only can we derive pleasure from interrogation, but also from imaginatively queering the text.

The Mark of Lilith and *The Watermelon Woman* advance Nataf's theory by foregrounding black lesbian subjectivities, shifting the deviant gaze to the pleasure derived from radical lesbian visibility. By interrupting the narrative flow, the filmmakers use self-reflexivity to insert their subjectivities into the film, engaging audiences intersubjectively with their lived experiences. They rebel against their erasure, the culture of dissemblance that silences black women's sexuality and the colonial gaze that stereotypes, objectifies and fetishises black women's bodies. Authorship enables their insertion into the historic and mythic queer lineages they trace in a radical act of transtemporal visibility.

Both films engage with transtemporality by utilising self-reflexivity and metacommentary within extra-temporal spaces. Existing outside of narrative time, the

filmmakers and characters converge within these spaces, directly addressing the audience with commentary on the film and its themes, which is then performed in the narrative. The direct connections made between the subjects and characters within the narrative reinforce the subject's existence as temporal parts of the filmmaker. For example, Cheryl's (Cheryl Dunye) life in *The Watermelon Woman* mirrors that of the film's subject, Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson). Similarly, in *The Mark of Lilith*, Zena (Pamela Lofton) forms a restorative relationship with the film's subject, Lilith/Lillia (Susan Franklyn). Here, 'temporal parts' doesn't mean these mythic figures or fictional characters are literal objects; rather, it describes how self-reflexivity enables their construction as temporal manifestations of the filmmaker's subjectivity. As the borders between the filmmaker, character and subject dissolve, so do the boundaries between time, reality and fiction. Thus, the filmmakers insert themselves and their subjectivities into the myth and history they trace in an act of transtemporal visibility. This doesn't require the filmmaker's physical presence within the film, only that their subjectivities are made apparent in the character. Zena, for example, is the confirmed avatar of filmmaker Zach Mack-Nataf.

***The Watermelon Woman* (1996)**

Transtemporality figures importantly in the historic elision of black lesbian subjectivities that Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* traces. Self-reflexivity produces a slippage between temporal time, disrupting narrative flow to foreground Dunye's multiple personalities as character, director, and a historic black lesbian figure. The film follows Cheryl (played by Dunye), an aspiring filmmaker who decides to make her first film on Fae Richards, the 'Watermelon Woman' mammy of the 1930s film *Plantation Memories*. In her attempt to reconstruct Fae's history, Cheryl discovers that Fae was a lesbian and romantically involved with the film's white butch director, Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz). The events of Fae's life begin to mirror Cheryl's when she enters a relationship with Diana (Guinevere Turner), a wealthy white woman who frequents the store.

Cheryl operates as Dunye's avatar and is Dunye herself, which blurs the lines between reality and fiction. Reality is further complicated by the documentary-within-documentary-within-film technique that Dunye calls the Dunyementary, which blends reality-based

material with autobiography, fiction, documentary and humour in her experimental style (Dunye 46). This self-reflexive technique enables her authorship and validates her construction of Fae (Zimmer 44). It also lends Dunye additional authority, which, as Linda L. Sullivan writes, audiences have been taught to view as evidence of expertise (458). Though Dunye deconstructs and satirises the documentary, she also “replicates it in a way that leads viewers not to question its verisimilitude” (Sullivan 455). Self-reflexivity foregrounds Dunye’s personal subjectivity, positioning her as both an expert and archivist on Fae and her own experience as a black lesbian, lending additional credibility to Fae’s constructed history. This lends Dunye “authorial voice”, permitting her to reference herself as “an auteur through the character of Cheryl while simultaneously revealing her own approaches and cinematic practices operative in the film” (Wimbley 146). Building on these theories, self-reflexivity allows Dunye to slip between these multiple personalities as the film progresses in an act of transtemporal visibility. By embodying all three, Dunye inscribes her physical body and subjectivity into the past so that she exists simultaneously across time.



Fig. 1, Cheryl addresses the audience, 1996.

Direct address signals a move into the documentary space that exists outside of narrative time. With no identifiable location or temporal marker, it therefore exists transtemporally. The set is dressed simply: post-it notes, articles and images adorn the walls signifying her academic research into the subject. Cheryl/Dunye has positioned the camera head-on in a medium shot before her chair, which resembles a director’s chair and interview seat from which she will address the audience. This presentation is reminiscent of reality television video diaries, a deconstruction of traditional narrative structure that blends

documentary with video diary. Here, Cheryl/Dunye are indistinguishable in this extra-temporal space and exist simultaneously in reality and fiction.

Mark Winokur argues that, in her attempt to excavate and reconstruct Fae's history, the dual roles Dunye plays function to reinscribe the lesbian body back into history. In identifying with Fae, "Dunye is attempting to integrate or reconstitute Cheryl/Dunye—an identity split by the traditional distinction between actor and director—as Cheryl Dunye" (235). The distance between director and actor collapses. She establishes both historical black lesbian subjectivity and private lesbian subjectivity through the presentation of her own body (Winokur 235). However, Winokur fails to consider that Fae is yet another construction of Dunye's identity, albeit representative rather than another replication of Dunye herself. I argue that Fae functions as a temporal part of Cheryl that exists in the past, as evidenced by the connections made between them in the film. Not only do Cheryl/Fae share similar body types, but Cheryl's life also mirrors Fae's. Additionally, the reclamation of black lesbian history through Fae is also Cheryl/Dunye's induction into history as a black lesbian filmmaker depicting black lesbian subjectivities. Karin D. Wimbley illustrates this point in discussing Fae's partner, June Walker (Cheryl Clarke). June legitimises Cheryl's quest to become a black lesbian filmmaker by asking her to make black lesbian history before it's gone just as Cheryl/Dunye does in documenting her own history (Wimbley 149).

In one scene, Cheryl/Dunye passionately recites Fae's line from *Plantation Memories* in front of the camera while wearing a green bandana tied on her head like Fae's bonnet. Laura Sullivan spotlights this scene as an important connection between Fae/Cheryl (450). I argue that Cheryl embodies Fae within this extra-temporal space. Cheryl/Dunye is positioned beside the television in the frame, an intimate position given the head-on close-up shot. However, only a fragment of the television is shown – the only indication that a scene is being played is Fae's voice – making Cheryl/Dunye's face the 'screen' on which we view the scene. Cheryl/Dunye embodies Fae right down to her presentation, visualising their temporal relationship. Transtemporal visibility places Cheryl Dunye in the past, the filmic present, and future simultaneously as mediated by the screen.



Fig. 2, Martha and Fae, 1996.

Wimbley and Winokur both argue that Cheryl's identification with Fae is as a lesbian ancestor and maternal figure. However, Cheryl emphasises her desire for Fae throughout the film, a sexuality denied by the Mammy stereotype. By reinscribing sex and sexuality into Fae, Dunye underscores her own erotic desire. Fae's desirability becomes Dunye's as Fae/Cheryl/Dunye become one, existing through Dunye as black lesbian representations of the past, present and future. Dunye inscribes herself and her sexuality into history, immortalising herself transtemporally. Erotic desire creates a further parallel between Cheryl/Diana and Fae/Martha Page. Both Diana and Martha Page mediate a level of access neither Fae nor Cheryl can attain on their own. That is, Cheryl's access to the Page family for an interview and Fae's access to film roles by a sexually exploitative Page. Access is granted for both through sexual relationships with these white women, who share a desire for the black body. Diana, who was born in Jamaica, reveals a preference for black partners. To Winokur, this historical critique of interracial desire reflects "a fascination with the notion of 'the black as other' that, even at its most benign, is an insufficient response to black lesbian privateness, given that Dunye's enterprise is to 'normalize' the black lesbian, to evade the consequences of racial otherness" (239). In consistently questioning interracial desire, Dunye facilitates greater intersubjectivity with the film, inviting all audiences to reflect on the politics complicating black lesbian desire.



Fig. 3, Diana and Cheryl, 1996.

In a sex scene with Diana, Dunye depicts interracial lesbian sexuality as potentially exploitative while also valorising the black lesbian body. In the sequence, Diana initiates physical contact with Cheryl by leaning against her, kissing her, and pulling Cheryl closer. When Cheryl and Diana lean off-screen, the camera focuses on the race film playing on television, which shows Fae Richards slapping a mixed-race woman who wishes to distance herself from blackness to pass among whites. The scene transitions to Diana and Cheryl's sex scene, filled with close-up shots of their bodies entwined. Cheryl's skin is prominently featured, darkened by shadows so it appears stark against Diana's. The scene focuses on Diana touching, kissing, and licking Cheryl's body via close-ups of Diana's mouth and tongue. The tongue is an eroticised object of exploration, signifying lesbian desire and sexuality while also suggesting Diana's objectification of Cheryl's body.

Thus, lesbian sex is normalised, non-phallic, and without the objectification of the phallogentric gaze. Instead of privileging sexual acts, the scene focuses on touch and sensation via close-ups of mouths, hands and limbs, reflecting mutual passion and desire. The earlier scenes' focus on the race film suggests Cheryl's conflicting feelings on interracial desire as invalidating her blackness. The focus given to Diana's desire for her body reveals Cheryl's fear of objectification, which reinforces questions of Diana's fetishisation. Dunye presents herself as desirable to black and white queer women. By placing her body on screen, she normalises and validates her body as desirable, sexual and empowered, an open rebellion against dissemblance and the 'double silence' Hammonds speaks of (304). Dunye's body also serves as a metaphor for larger discussions on desirability, interracial desire, revealing how black lesbian sexuality is policed internally and externally.

The film also interrogates fetishisation through Cheryl and Tamara (Valarie Walker), prompting a discussion on the complexities surrounding black lesbian sexuality and the policing of desire we face. One single black subjectivity is not representative of black lesbian identity, an essentialism that Dunye resists, Sullivan notes (451). In including various lesbian subjectivities, Dunye rejects judgment on desire and interracial dating, opting instead to showcase the politics that mitigate desire. Tamara's accusation of Cheryl wanting to be white by dating Diana reveals "the ways in which Black lesbians face oppression based on race from both Black *and* white lesbians" (Allen 127). Dunye doesn't suggest that dating is the issue, but that power and racial dynamics mitigate these relationships (Allen 129). Tamara accentuates what Sullivan describes as the deconstruction of the "good" and "bad" identities to "reveal the way that oppressions and their internalisations are layered and intertwined" (452). Via Tamara, Dunye makes various black lesbian subjectivities and desires visible, further immortalising the black lesbian body.

The Mark of Lilith (1986)

Written and directed by Bruna Fionda, Polly Gladwin and Zachary Nataf, *The Mark of Lilith* follows Zena (Pamela Lofton), a black lesbian woman researching horror's depiction of the threatening other in monstrous women, and their links to goddesses in mythology. After a horror movie, she meets Lillia, a white bisexual vampire in an unhappy relationship with her controlling, misogynist vampire lover, Luke (Jeremy Peters). Romance with the bold Zena reminds Lillia of her inherent rebellious nature, inspiring her to embrace all aspects of herself. Lillia and Luke represent Lilith and Lucifer, connecting Zena to the historic erasure of queer subjectivities in mythology that she rebels against.

Zena's extra-diegetic narration, fourth wall breaks, and the use of an in-film clapper emphasise self-reflexivity. Further, filmmaker Zachary Nataf confirmed in an interview with *Foreground* that Zena is him before his transition (Jenkins and Ward 5:43, 8:17). These reflexive elements point directly to Zena as a character, a filmmaker making a film within the film, and an avatar of the filmmaker himself. Through her, the filmmakers address the audience directly, immersing the spectator in the film's construction, its fiction and their

shared reality. Participation in the narrative visualises black lesbian subjectivity and projects Nataf/Zena into Lilith's myth, radically altering its meaning transtemporally.



Fig. 4, Zena addresses the audience, 1986.

To signify Zena's transtemporality, the filmmakers place Zena out of narrative time. In a slow panning shot across a dark theatre, Zena's extra-diegetic voice appears before she does, situating her as narrator and character. The mise-en-scène features a nebulous black background and rows of red theatre seats peppered with masked spectators staring into a single-source light, presumably the screen. When Zena is shown, she is shot in a medium close-up, looking directly into the camera. The black background and single source light give the impression of a chiaroscuro, calling attention to the theatre, but relegating all else to background. As Wimbley noted, the double reflexivity of the documentary reinforces her authority as narrator. It also illuminates the identity split between Zena the character, the avatar and the filmmaker. Like Dunye, the theatre in which Zena conducts her direct address is out of narrative time and without location, and as such, can exist anywhere at any time. In this transtemporal moment, Zena's identities inhabit the same space across various points in time. Transtemporality is further reinforced by fourth wall breaks and a clapperboard shot of the film-within-film preceding a smash cut to Zena narrating. These breaks in the narrative flow destabilise time, collapsing the space between audience and film, past and present, fiction and reality.

Destabilisation allows Nataf/Zena the freedom to modify and subvert Lilith's myth. By embracing vampirism as a rebellion against the erasure of black lesbian visibility, Zena subverts the WHP's control of her image. Her vampirism subverts the monstrous feminine trope as it denies the WHP the ability to define itself against her image. Barbara Creed

describes the monstrous feminine as “abject in relation to her sexual and reproductive functions, a misogynistic fantasy ... a construct of patriarchal ideology, and male directors designed to enable the male viewer to explore his own deeply embedded fears about female sexuality” (4). To Creed, the embrace of monstrosity is emancipatory and oppositional in its revolt against ‘aggressive phallacy.’ However, Creed fails to consider how race impacts this theory. In Creed’s definition, monstrosity is defined by WHP. The black woman’s body has long been depicted as a site of abjection from which the WHP defines and reinforces itself. As evidenced in her direct address, Zena’s marginality positions her as oppositional to such definitions. She does not define herself or vampirism as monstrous; she hasn’t become monstrous or violent in her defiance of the WHP and is not made monstrous by her embrace of vampirism or her sexuality. Instead, Zena’s defiant visibility rejects WHP control entirely. She subverts the monstrous feminine by defining herself against the WHP’s monstrosity and projecting monstrosity back onto it.

Further, Zena’s vampirism resists the erasure of black lesbian sexuality and the silence that the culture of dissemblance creates. It grants an escape from the confines of sexual repression, where she can openly display lesbian desire. Tanya Krzywinska suggests that viewers derive pleasure from the lesbian vampire’s evasion of heterosexuality and masculinity, or that she was “built upon the precarious tension between the two” (108). The lesbian vampire is the transgressive figure Nataf describes, though instead of queering the text, the inclusion of Zena’s subjectivity centres black lesbian intersubjectivity.



Fig. 5, Lillia in the mirror, 1986.

In an act of further rebellion, lesbian desire is depicted as restorative and empowering. In one prominent scene, Luke lies in bed while Lillia sits at her vanity, staring into the mirror. Stark, low-key overhead lighting creates a dramatic chiaroscuro effect that highlights these

two spaces in a nebulous black background. This space exists beyond time and borders, symbolising the mythic occupied by Lilith, whom Lillia personifies. When the perspective shifts onto Lillia, the camera acts as a mirror. The lighting reveals more of her body in this shot, while in the dialogue, she asserts that she can see herself. Using chiaroscuro relegates Luke to the shadows and obscures half of Lillia's face. Like the trope, the film divorces Lillia/Lilith from the patriarchal motivations that demonised her. The isolation and highlighting used signify Lillia/Lilith's separation from WHP control via Luke/Lucifer. The shadows indicate that Lillia/Lilith is still confined within the patriarchy but emerging through her connection to Zena.

Reflections emphasise Lilith and Zena's connection as mutually restorative, which visualises Zena as a contemporary revision of Lilith's myth. Lilith, a goddess of Jewish origin transported to Britain, transforms into a rebellious feminist figure marginalised into monstrosity by the WHP. By inverting the life force she represents with the vampire mythos, she is sexualised and controlled by Lucifer/Luke, who represents the Christian WHP. Meeting Zena, who defiantly embraces otherness as a source of power, inspires Lillia to embrace herself as Lilith, thus restoring her reflection. Similarly, Zena's embrace of Lilith restores her own reflection. In a café scene, Zena discusses her research into goddesses with a waitress, noting that most goddesses are connected to blood, a symbol of life. The waitress turns to the large mirror and startles in surprise when she realises that Zena has no reflection. Like Lillia, Zena's lack of reflection in this scene references her disconnection from myth, given the erasure of queer figures by the WHP. In her attempt to trace the lineages of queer empowerment in myth, Zena connects with Lilith. Her restored reflection represents a fragmented identity and history made whole and ultimately visible through inscription into Lilith's myth.

This lack of reflection implies Zena's vampirism, which, when coupled with her identity as a black American, serves as commentary on England's colonial past. Cemented by blaxploitation films like *Blacula* (William Crain, 1972) and *Ganja & Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1973), the black vampire challenges revisionist myths that seek to minimise or erase colonisation and chattel enslavement. Dale Hudson, while discussing vampires and race in *Blacula*, states that the Black vampire speaks to "[enslavement] as a repressed moment in transnational U.S. history" (145). This extends to England's participation in and profit from chattel

enslavement. Zena's visibility refuses the nation's attempt to repress this memory, resisting control and erasure by colonial hegemonies. Conversely, Luke/Lucifer's predatory behaviour represents its ongoing violence, particularly directed at women.

The black lesbian vampire's body reflects human histories suppressed but made undeniably visible. Jasper Lauderdale discusses the radical alterity of the black vampire, a transmutation of the black (notably queer) body that can exist with and beyond the past, present and future (276). The vampire mythos "augments the black body, so consistently deprived of life throughout history and art, with immortality and a timeless point of view" (Lauderdale 277). Though challenging and subverting hegemonic ideologies, the black lesbian vampire remains problematically connected to white anxieties of sexual deviance and promiscuity, which reinforce black women's bodies as a site of abjection and fascination. However, the black lesbian vampire successfully supplants the whiteness and masculinity in the vampire mythos with radical alterity (Lauderdale 289). Blood, sexual desire and violence converge with the adaptability of black women, who have developed strong survival mechanisms existing at the margins of society. The black lesbian vampire is valorous and eternal, occupying the present while transmitting, transmuting and transcending the past.

Radical alterity is also represented in the intimacy between Zena and Lillia. After meeting at the theatre, Zena and Lillia lie in Zena's bed beneath the blankets. The scene is shot at an angle behind Lillia, assuming her perspective on Zena as they kiss. Like *The Watermelon Woman*, this scene centres Zena's body as desirable and Zena herself as sexual. Further, lesbian intimacy is depicted as gentle and slow via kisses along the skin, caressing, and Zena and Lillia embracing each other, eliminating the phallogentric gaze by privileging touch. Power dynamics are carefully negated as Lillia acknowledges Zena's embrace as restorative, while Zena acknowledges Lilith's myth as empowering. This stands in strong contrast to the power dynamics in Cheryl and Diana's relationship. In subsequent scenes, the pair attend a daytime carnival where they kiss in public. They enter the funhouse in which both their reflections are restored, representing the fulfilment they achieve through their relationship.

Lillia/Lilith and Zena's relationship is another subversion. The film portrays and valorises black women, their interracial lesbian relationship, lesbian desire and sex. Lesbian desire and intimacy are normalised, non-phallic, and non-exploitative. Here, black women

are gentle, educated, feminine, and desirable without fetishisation. Like Cheryl, the presence of Zena's physical body inscribes the black lesbian into the mythic past, present and future. Just as Zena restores Lilith's myth, Lilith validates Zena as part of that myth. Thus, Zena/Nataf is made eternally visible, elevated to a goddess figure of resistance, sexuality and life. Rejecting the monstrous feminine, Zena and Lilith subvert the WHP by embracing their Otherness, thereby calling attention to the violence, racism, and misogyny it enforces.

Conclusion

The need for black lesbian visibility in film is not necessarily a demand for recognition. Rather, it is a demand for witnessing to which visibility is key. Kelly Oliver describes recognition as a pathology of oppression: "the internalisation of stereotypes of inferiority and superiority leave the oppressed with the sense that they are lacking something that only their superior dominators have or can give them" (78). Recognition also calls for the WHP to recognise itself in the black lesbian, thereby eliminating difference. As Anat Pick aptly puts it: what is the point of lesbian films if their depiction of desire is normalised like heterosexual desire (104)? Oliver proposes a form of witnessing that "has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and the religious or now political connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or *bearing witness*" (81).

The Watermelon Woman and *The Mark of Lilith* use self-reflexivity and authorship in a radical act of transtemporal visibility. Where Dunye recovers erased black lesbian visibility in the archival past, *The Mark of Lilith* recovers visibility in mythology. Both insert themselves into history and myth as enduring legacies, radically altering present meaning and future possibilities. The audience engages intersubjectively, not necessarily in recognition of themselves, but by bearing witness to a subjectivity undermined by marginalisation. Through it, the audience learns their history and significance, a context Oliver contends cannot be reduced to simple fact (84). For black lesbian spectators, this intersubjectivity renders the black lesbian body material and eternal, for as film survives across time, so does black lesbian subjectivity.

Black lesbian visibility is an act of rebellion, creativity, and radical expression. These films prove that our experiences, though diverse, are shared and our history is worth

constructing. Self-reflexivity thins the boundaries between the spectator and filmmaker, time and space, fiction and reality, inviting the audience into the joys and complexity of the black lesbian experience. We are encouraged by their presence to contribute our own histories, myths, and stories. They require us to bear witness to the black lesbian experience and question the institutions that marginalise. In witnessing, we assume responsibility to make it easier for such representations to exist.

Works Cited

- Allen, Stephanie Andrea. "'I Am a Lesbian': Black Queer Subjectivities in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Pariah*." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 118–40. <https://doi.org/10.5406/womgenfamcol.10.2.0118>.
- Brock, Maria, and Emil Edenborg. "You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2020, pp. 673–700. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-8618730>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055>.
- Crain, William, director. *Blacula*. American International Pictures, 1972.
- Creed, Barbara. *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*. Routledge, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036654>.
- Dunye, Cheryl, director. *The Watermelon Woman*. Dancing Girl, 1996.
- . "Structural Laughter and Constructed Intimacies: The Self-Reflexivity of Cheryl Dunye." Interview by Terri Francis. *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2018, pp. 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2018.72.2.45>.
- Fionda, Bruna, et al., directors. *The Mark of Lilith*. London College of Printing, 1986.
- Gunn, Bill, director. *Ganja & Hess*. Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, 1973.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *differences*, vol. 6, nos. 2–3, 1994, pp. 126–45. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-6-2-3-126>.
- Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 912–20. www.jstor.org/stable/3174692.
- hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 15–23. www.jstor.org/stable/44111660.
- . "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Reel to Real: Race, Class and the Movies*, Routledge, 2008, pp. 253–74. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203440919>.
- Hudson, Dale. *Vampires, Race, and Transnational Hollywoods*. Edinburgh UP, 2017.
- Jenkins, Joshua Henry, and Michael Ward. "The Mark of Lilith: A Conversation with Bruna Fionda, Polly Gladwin and Zach Mack-Nataf." *YouTube*, uploaded by Foreground, 18 Oct. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqqiS9Ch5bU.

- Krzywinska, Tanya. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci?" *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, edited by Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, Routledge, 1995, pp. 107–19. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203990940>.
- Lauderdale, Jasper. "'There Existed an Addiction to Blood': Exhuming the Transtemporal Body." *Black Camera*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2023, pp. 275–94. <https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.14.2.16>.
- McHugh, Kathleen. "The Experimental 'Dunyementary': A Cinematic Signature Effect." *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, edited by Robin Blaetz, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 339–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.33610713.19>.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, pp. 29–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_4.
- Nataf, Z. Isiling. "Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Cinema." *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, edited by Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, Routledge, 1995, pp. 62–88. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203990940>.
- Oliver, Kelly. "Witnessing and Testimony." *Parallax*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2004, pp. 78–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464032000171118>.
- Pick, Anat. "New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films." *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron, Edinburgh UP, 2004, pp. 103–18.
- Sider, Theodore. *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford UP, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924443X.001.0001>.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton UP, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzsmfbq>.
- Sullivan, Laura L. "Chasing Fae: *The Watermelon Woman* and Black Lesbian Possibility." *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2000, pp. 448–60. www.jstor.org/stable/3299571.
- White, Patricia. "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: *The Haunting*." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss, Routledge, 1991, pp. 142–72. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699553>.
- Wimbley, Karin D. "Stereotypy, Mammy, and Recovery in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*." *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, edited by Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, Duke UP, 2018, pp. 143–59.

- Winokur, Mark. "Body and Soul: Identifying (with) the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*." *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representation by African American Women*, edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 231–52.
- Zimmer, Catherine. "Histories of *The Watermelon Woman*: Reflexivity between Race and Gender." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 41–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-002>.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	The Active Archive: Haptic Reconstruction in Albertina Carri's <i>Los Rubios</i> (2003)
Author	Ximena Oñate-García
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

The Active Archive: Haptic Reconstruction in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* (2003)

Ximena Oñate-García
University of Edinburgh

The fragility of memory beyond any specific context is a biological and universal bodily process. That is the initial reflection behind Albertina Carri's 2003 Los Rubios, a film that, through its retelling of autobiographical events from the Argentinian Dirty War, breaks documentary conventions and maximises the audiovisual medium to portray an erased history. Aligning with frameworks from Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History, this paper contends that the process of historical reconstruction is best questioned when audiences are encouraged to experience agency through the body rather than through a passive, institutionalised historical reconstruction. In Los Rubios, director Albertina Carri utilises haptic visuality, a technique examined by Laura Marks, in which the images pursue a sensorial response from the eye. Through an audience that encounters the reconstruction of events via a sensory experience, new perspectives can be formed. The methods utilised by Carri to present either past or contemporary documented archives, such as photographs and testimonies, encourage the body to notice and reflect on the gaps and fragility of a nation's collective memory. By intentionally foregrounding the inability to achieve a linear or truthful reconstruction, the documentary moves beyond the political dichotomies and heroic iconographies often promoted under conventional mediations of collective memory managed by national institutions. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Los Rubios transforms the human body itself into a momentary active archive, proposing embodiment as an alternative, sensorial way of processing information that allows historical reconstruction to remain a flowing and ever-evolving process of reparation, functioning under the now, rather than a set of definitive truths left behind in a fixed and empty past.

Introduction

Memory, like the human body, is not timeless; as a result, history, a process arising from human reconstruction, remains full of gaps. Once time and death defeat memory, humans turn to objects to reconstruct, often categorising and institutionalising them. Yet, as Ocasio et al. state, this process "is shaped by organisational practices, information technologies, and the politics enveloping archivists and their audiences" (683). Inevitable

erasure therefore arises from biased external frameworks, while the power lies with those who collect, store, and interpret the objects themselves. This imbalance is central to Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* (2003), a documentary about the Argentine dictatorship that questions historical reconstruction by "examining representations and documentations of ... the selective retrieval of analogies from the past" (Ocasio et al. 695). *Los Rubios* becomes an active investigation into how Argentina's institutionalised historical reconstruction has shaped collective memory, often denying its own gaps and repudiations. Rather than accepting history as a fixed truth, it invites audiences to experience it as a living, ever-evolving, embodied process.

Similarly, Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1942) challenges the common misconception that history is always an active process because it reconstructs the past. Benjamin's passive historicism arises as a practice attached to an "empty, homogenous time" (260), carried onto the present through "traditional practices" that superficially engage with "cultural treasures" (257). That is, an engagement through which hierarchal rulers treat objects of the past as conquests to be exhibited, almost like prizes, while simultaneously drowning their connections to the present, claiming their significance belonged to a faraway and disjointed time. Here, a static timeline presents itself as a matter of memorisation, solidifying an "eternal image of the past" (261): distanced and dead, incapable of continuous growth (256-257). Its contrary, a present that Benjamin describes as the "time of the now" (260), opposes a motionless pulse – it disrupts chronology, seizing a fleeting moment in which time isn't dictated by a past, present, or future, instead colliding into a non-linear existence. Compared by Benjamin with the act of naming constellations (261), the "time of now" parallels the capacity to trace strokes over dead stars which existed centuries apart yet become momentarily visible under the eye of the critical historian. Here, like a heliotropic flower that dances, gently bending from east to west to brace itself for the sun, the active historian allows the past to unfold towards the present, dictating its growth and direction (256).

Ultimately, expanding on previous scholarship that investigates the representation of the fragility of memory in *Los Rubios*, this paper examines how the historical gaps – arising from past romanticised reconstructions of the Argentine dictatorship – are materialised through the moving image to become detonators of Benjamin's active "time of now".

Through its use of haptic visuality, a concept first developed by Laura Marks where “vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes” (xi), director Albertina Carri seeks to actively evoke a connection between the viewer and their senses, highlighting elements such as textures and human skin through extreme close-ups or provocative angles, thereby arousing a tactile and bodily response. While Benjamin’s view of the chronicler, a figure able to fill the gaps left by romanticised historicism (256), may be utopian, that does not mean that the historians reach an impasse. Instead, these gaps become a call for action; the “time of now” draws on the past to critically engage with the present, becoming an active history that resists institutionalised imbalances (Benjamin 261). By emphasising tactile materiality and encouraging audiences to experience an embodied historical reconstruction, Carri prevents the consumption of historical evidence as absolute linear truths, instead using cinema as a mediator to evoke resistance against the erasures and biases of passive historicism.

History and *Los Rubios*

Established by a coup in 1976, the “preferred repressive method” of “disappearance” during Argentina’s military dictatorship began under “its antirevolutionary ‘dirty war’ ... [with] an estimated ten thousand disappeared on the political left” (Robben 129). Throughout the next eight years, a period of violent instability and widespread casualties dictated the future of generations who lived under the repression caused by the Process of National Reorganisation (PRN). Furthermore, as Crenzel explains, these clandestine war crimes were conducted under strategies such as “the division of tasks among perpetrators, the use of ‘war names’ to conceal their identities, [and] the deliberate destruction of files and buildings” (1068), all of which resulted in evidence erasure that made the reconstruction of the crimes nearly inconceivable. The brutality of the crackdown against those declared subversive left Argentina with a challenging future, as it struggled to come to terms with a history from which most evidence had vanished.

Consequently, Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983 marked the beginning of a series of efforts by elected President Raúl Alfonsín to navigate the reconstruction of the crimes (Crenzel 1063). However, throughout the period of the dictatorship, the military had

already adopted defensive strategies, justifying their actions by blaming them on guerrilla warfare (Robben 137), thus transforming the discourse about the crimes into a political dichotomy (153). However, Crenzel expands on how this narrative was, in fact, convenient for the state, as a focus on this dichotomy disregarded the government's violence and responsibilities prior to the coup (1066, 1072). This logic, also named the "theory of the two evils", was illustrated by Alfonsín's decision to persecute leaders from both sides of the dirty war (Crenzel 1065), mirroring Benjamin's elements of a historicism that seeks to solidify a romanticised version of the past, ignoring relevant casualties (257-258). The glorification of democracy under this pretence was "forward-looking" (Crenzel 1066), just like the empty progress that erases the capacity for the critical historian to engage with the past beyond a homogeneous passivity (Benjamin 261).

Nonetheless, Alfonsín's attempt at a reconstruction prevailed, for which the state established the CONADEP (Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), a state agency in charge of a series of written reports often referred to as "*Nunca Más/Never Again*" (Crenzel 1063). These reports, based on the victim's written testimonies, signify an important task, as they "condense a portion of lost history and lived history; they operate as a bond between the past and the present, and between the dead and the living" (Crenzel 1069). This method, besides being undeniably relevant, gets comparably close to aligning with Benjamin's principles of the active "time of now". Testimonies seize the voices of the victims through a fleeting image, denying their possibility to become a mere cultural treasure; the testimonies should, in theory, allow present historians to rescue the past struggles for further present action (Benjamin 257).

Notwithstanding, rather than representing a historical reconstruction aligned with Benjamin's "time of now", the Report's chosen language follows a "humanitarian narrative" that "places the crimes outside history" (Crenzel 1065). When describing victims in its prologue, *Nunca Más* avoids a direct verbal link to the terminology of guerrilleros, although many political activists form part of the testimonies (Crenzel 1067). Persecuting the same ideological group that was simultaneously deemed the victim in *Nunca Más* would have demonstrated a contradiction from the state's reasoning; thus, the categorisation under which the testimonies are positioned strategically removes the political identities of the

victims. Accordingly, there lies the inevitable paradox behind the historical reconstruction of the Dirty War, as Crenzel illustrates:

The Report gives a new political significance to the identity of the disappeared with respect to the dictatorial government's perspective, which identified them as guerrilla members. At the same time, it renders them apolitical by presenting them as innocent victims and by effectively excluding their ideological commitments (1067).

Therefore, the Report describes the persecutors under a "semantic delusion" (Crenzel 1066), allowing this language to position the crimes under a barbarist dissociation, a key element of passive historicism (Benjamin 257). This portrayal of the victims, provided through a humanitarian approach that presents them as generic individuals, and not political subjects, does represent a valuable argument against the dictatorship's justification of their crimes. At the same time, however, it results in an erasure of the socioeconomic conditions that led to the coup, obscuring a side of history just as relevant for the collective memory of Argentina's nation.

Therefore, *Nunca Más* paradoxically results in a destruction of Benjamin's "time of now", replacing it instead with a passive lesson of civic morality that does not question the power structures that survived the dictatorship. Correspondingly, *Los Rubios* director Albertina Carri emerges from a shaped generation that grew up under the contradictions of this fragmented nation, where she lost her parents – both scholars disappeared under the military regime – when she was just a child. While Carri has a filmography primarily composed of fiction features, in this film, overwhelmed by the lack of evidence surrounding her parents' disappearance, she attempts to make sense of the impactful event that changed her life beyond the political dichotomy that has undeniably shaped its historical perception. Inevitably, the process of filming becomes its own space of reconstruction, repeatedly encountering the unfixable gaps that exist beneath the fragility of memory and the contradictions of the previously established institutional reconstruction. Eventually, rather than quitting at the realisation that a complete view of the events is forever lost, Carri positions herself amidst Benjamin's thesis; the key does not lie in the ability to perfectly reconstruct history, but rather in one's own capacity to abandon the elusive pursuit of an objective historical truth. Instead, through hapticity, audiences are

transformed into active archives, embodying an investigation that embraces fragmentation as the core intersection that allows a reparation through the “time of now”.

Analysis: Photographs

Developed by writer Marianne Hirsch, the concept of Postmemory highlights that generations that did not directly experience specific historical events are also greatly shaped by their ancestors’ experiences. This concept further aligns with Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where he borrows from Lotze to explain that often what humans envy is not defined by the future, but by a familiar past; this yearning forges a theological and ancestral connection between past and present, allowing historical materialism to become the disruptor that challenges past struggles into guidance for a potential revolutionary present (255). Notably, this act can be seen in the work by the Postmemory artists who, instead of solely relying on public recollections of the periods lived by their parents, create art “to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 111). Personal and internal reconstructions allow some distance from institutional and political biases, and although at times imperfect and subjective, these reconstructions also offer opportunities for new perspectives and the ability to find new meanings from rigid reconstructions of the past.

Furthermore, particularly relevant in the context of *Los Rubios*, Hirsch discusses the power of photography within this personal process as an “inscriptive (archival) memorial practice that also has an incorporative (embodied) dimension” (117). In this sense, using photographs as objects able to reconstruct can be seen as a haptic practice; they become archives that engage in a sensorial process driven by the need to look and contextualise the frame. At the same time, however, as Hirsch argues (116), and Bartalini discusses in relation to *Los Rubios*, the photographic image exhibits a “paradoxical character ... between the reality of its reference in the past and its absences in the present” (“el carácter paradójico ... entre lo real de su referencia en el pasado y sus ausencias en el presente”; 10; my translation). While archival photography captures valuable moments for the process of

looking and reconstructing the past, it also emphasises the gaps around it. The focus of a sensorial engagement, however, can be employed to address this liminality.

Throughout *Los Rubios*, there is a vast collection of photographs of Carri's family, presented as part of the personal sphere of evidence to reconstruct. Seeking to engage with the investigation beyond a non-diegetic realm, and as an attempt to navigate her own identity as part of the post-memory generation, Carri asks actress Analía Couceyro to portray a recreational version of Carri in front of the camera. As a result of this unique decision, the photographs in the film are unconventionally presented in a diegetic manner, within the documentary's space, often disguised as mise-en-scène around the office where Couceyro reviews her sources and progress on the investigation. While interacting with the images, she cuts, touches, moves, and engages with them; there is a materialisation of the "time of now". Through this representation, audiences are immersively positioned in the middle of the personal reconstruction.

Diving into the first act of *Los Rubios*, once the main tones of the investigation have been set, a handheld camera pans down, revealing close-up inserts of a collage of images. The blurriness of the photographs and the often-sliced body parts encourage contemplation, as the digital camera adds texture that disrupts the static photographic state (fig. 1). As illustrated by this example, Marks emphasises how a haptic touch is often encouraged when a "decaying image makes the viewer reflect on how much of perception is generated by memory and longing, rather than engagement with a crisply available visual object" (156). Like this collage, photographs throughout the film are not mindless objects. They do not serve as supporting evidence for what is being said. Instead, they communicate through the absence of context, activating a bodily response. In other words, the photographs stimulate what Hirsch calls "the act of looking" (117) to materialise the liminality between an incomplete documentation of the past and the present, reflecting Carri's own confusion regarding her parents' identities, despite the physical evidence at hand.



Fig. 1, Close-up of the blurred photographic collage, 2003.

Furthermore, often “haptic images refuse visual plenitude ... to prevent an easy connection to narrative” (Marks 177). By refusing the audience a detailed look at the image, not only is the act of looking encouraged, but viewers are also forced to engage with a distant, blurry version that parallels that of a faded memory. For example, around the third act of *Los Rubios*, after the investigation reaches a dead end, a sequence opens with a framed photograph seen earlier, right before the haptic collage, initially appearing meaningless without context. Both times, Carri emphasises Couceyro in the foreground, framing the leading lines towards her. The act of looking is embodied, highlighting the complex layers that shape how the archive is presented to the public (fig. 2). The same act is carried throughout the film, often when engaging with particularly difficult images related to forensic and institutionalised evidence. The use of this framing creates a distance from the photograph that prevents audiences from noticing the details of the photograph, materialising the loss of detail and reality, gradually fading as archival material is reconstructed and represented within external frameworks over time.

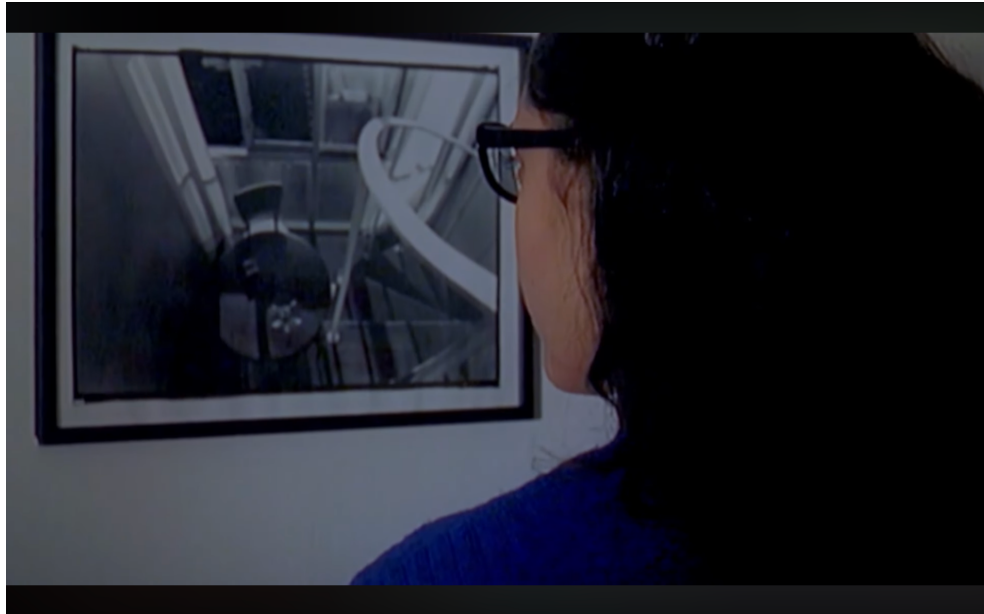


Fig. 2, Couceyro framed in the foreground before the photograph, 2003.

Moreover, as the sequence progresses, Couceyro reveals that the significant photograph is from the clandestine centre where Carri's parents were tortured, and it was taken by Paula, its only survivor. By the time this information is disclosed, the photograph is out of frame, and the scene cuts to Couceyro narrating the stories Paula shared off the record. Wanting to avoid becoming a part of the political dichotomy of the dictatorship, Paula is revealed to have denied public testimonies and will continue to do so. While Couceyro narrates, Carri guides the dialogue from behind the lens, the real and the reenacted Carri collaborating in the reconstruction from Paula's unrecorded narrations, as the tactile texture of the moment emphasises the fragility of stories passed by word of mouth.

Eventually, Couceyro mentions Paula drew a picture of the clandestine centre's cell layout, as the camera tilts down towards her, recreating an image of Paula's drawing. This is another haptic approach foregrounded; the utilisation of "drawn images rather than photographic or film footage of the site of an assassination" (Swalwell 3). According to Marks, this allows a midpoint between valuable representation that focuses less on the political meaning and more on the event itself, avoiding biased "red herring" representations that divert attention away from the central issue (44). Accordingly, the

objective categorisation that Benjamin relates to passive historicism includes a one-sided interpretation from the “victor” within the power structure of historical reconstruction (256). As illustrated, Marks’s approach suggests that the detachment from an objective optical reference makes way for an unbiased encounter with the space that surrounded the crimes, unrestricted by previous institutionalised frameworks. The recurring reference to Paula’s drawing of the cells thus represents an active effort to see beyond the prepossessions established under the state’s ideal reconstruction of events.

Here, as Couceyro redraws Paula’s original image, the shot remains medium wide, and the back of Couceyro stays obstructed. Eventually, the drawing is revealed through a slow zoom (fig. 3). In this moment, the distorted VHS texture, more prominent as the camera zooms, makes an already abstract drawing even less reconstructable. The reveal, despite its contrasting close-up, is anticlimactic, as no comparison makes the layout of the clandestine centre recognisable. The image itself becomes a reflection of the inability to reconstruct the crimes undergone within the space, information fading as it goes from mouth to mouth, generation by generation. Ultimately, the overlying hapticity of the moving image itself reaches an inevitable conclusion; no amount of aesthetic cognitivism can fill the disrupted gaps of an erased history.

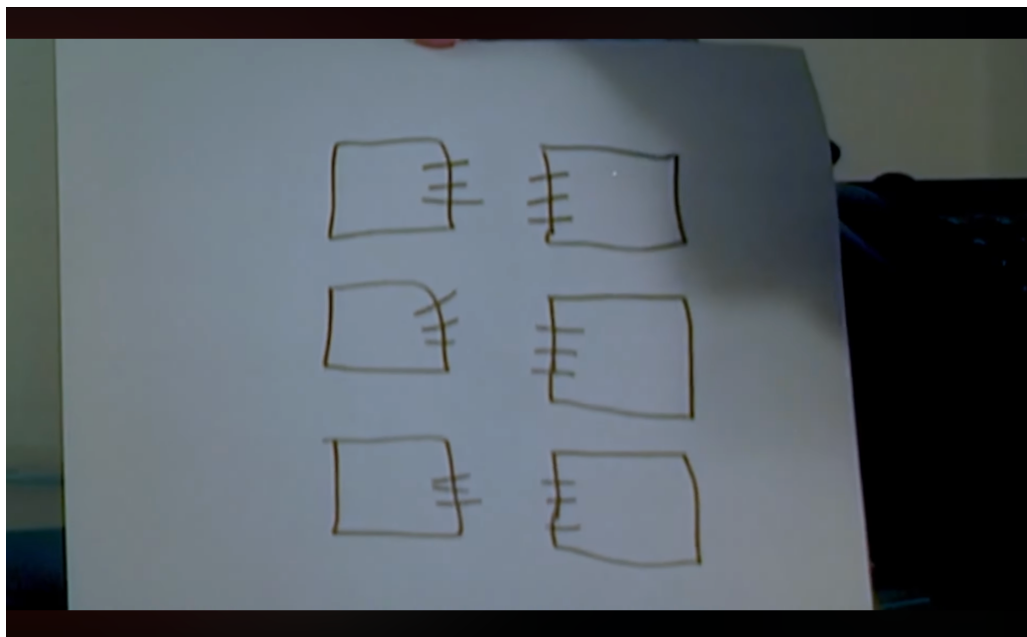


Fig. 3, Couceyro recreating Paula’s drawing of the cell layout, 2003.

Thus, while true that, as Breckenridge argues, “Carri subtly underscores the inadequacy of these verbal and visual representations; rather than assist ... [they] work to inhibit viewer recognition” (16), there also lies a deeper meaning to this conclusion. Carri’s representation within the Postmemory generation evokes Benjamin’s spirit of the “time of now”, forging the ancestral personal sphere between the past and the present (255). But beyond that, photographs and drawings are presented in ways that invite the audience to embody the researcher’s perspective; they are encouraged to observe, listen, and reconstruct. Because the evidence often leads nowhere, offering incomplete and non-tangible answers, one suggests that in *Los Rubios*, photographs fail their evidential purpose. But rather than allowing this frustration to become a conclusion, *Los Rubios* transforms the gaps into a reflection. By materialising this liminality through a haptic visuality, the human body, instead of the film itself, becomes the site for reconstruction, allowing audiences to question from within, from an embodied and present reconstruction, which, as a result, questions how collective memory is often handled in political and institutional absolutes, and how cinema can mediate alternatives to this unstable practice.

Analysis: Testimonies

When thinking about documentary forms that align with Benjamin’s now-time, Annette Kuhn’s concept of the ‘memory text’ illustrates a prime example of an approach that is active rather than passive, as it is a form that “undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence” (303). Rather than assuming that recollections are completely accurate, memory work treats the past as clues that need to be explored. The memory text becomes “a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, ‘snap-shots’ and flashes that can generate a feeling of synchrony: remembered events seem to be outside any linear time frame” (299). More conventional approaches, such as the essay documentary, also present a “personal subjectivity as it replaces the teleological organisations of narrative” (Alter and Corrigan 9). The following of a mind at work rather than a more classic cause-and-effect progression is the main thing these approaches have in common. Contrastingly, however, memory texts

“[are] opposed to autobiography, ... appear[ing] to be capable of feeding readily into collective forms of consciousness” (Kuhn 303). In the memory text, an opportunity arises when filmmakers present a personal narrative originating from within but expand it into a collective output that doesn’t seek to align with a single identity. As a result, reconstruction becomes an active process between the private and public spheres. Therefore, under this approach, the gaps generated in history are themselves presented as non-linear and poetic, and it is upon the audience to reconstruct them.

In *Los Rubios*, the essay film conventions are broken as the direction of the plot doesn’t emerge from a direct engagement with its subject. Throughout the film, the superimposition of an active process of investigation and the physical evidence evolves the “I” in the reconstruction into a collective one. Through Couceyro’s representation of Carri, and the participation of the film crew in the investigation, the filming process itself becomes a liminal site “of construction and negotiation” (Kuhn 299), not just by intertwining multiple subjects and objects that interact with the camera, but also by materialising the gaps originating from the process and foregrounding a sensorial engagement with them. Audiences are therefore invited to connect with the fragility of time beyond a particular context, ultimately revealing how fractured memories and contradictory records can undermine absolute claims by institutional authorities.

Despite the complexity brought by this approach, the main critique of Carri’s *Los Rubios* has been the “lack of a dimension of political ideology within the film” (“la falta de una dimensión ideológica de la película”; Pignuoli 334; my translation). While Carri engages with her father’s leftist work by reading a passage from one of his books, the documentary was nonetheless criticised for failing to reflect her parents’ political stance (Pignuoli 334; Blejmar 53; Nouzeilles 273-274). Perhaps the most prominent critic supporting this view appears in the film itself; the INCAA (Argentina’s National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts) was, in fact, the first to flag a lack of political discourse during the production stage. To let the production team know, they send a letter that reaches them near the middle of the film. As Couceyro is filmed reading it out loud, the INCAA announces their financial withdrawal from the documentary, fearing that by putting so much weight on Carri’s investigation, there would be a lack of explicit political substance. The INCAA proposes a solution: by incorporating filmed testimonies from her parents’ former colleagues, who might offer a

deeper perspective on their political background, the film will position itself politically, offering audiences a clear message.

Immediately after the letter is read, a jump cut reveals a black and white shot, the same one used throughout the film to capture the liminality of the film crew and briefly breaking Couceyro's character. The team discusses the implications of the letter, as Couceyro notes that the 'colleagues' suggested by the INCAA have personally signed it, presuming that their involvement in the film would shift the focus towards another heroic portrayal of the dictatorship's martyrs. Ultimately, Carri states that a film with this perspective would be valuable, but not her place to make. Succumbing to this request, rather than allowing the film to become a memory-text that mediates the "time of now", would risk a historical revisionism aligning with previous justifications and biased reconstructions discussed under the historical context of this paper. As part of the post-memory generation, Carri's viewpoint acknowledges the political conflict behind the history of Argentina without presenting it as the central concern of her investigation, which is instead focused on questioning what the inconsistencies of this process mean for the present of her nation's fragmented collective memory. Seeking to foreground the memory-text, scattered and poetic, Carri avoids the use of conventional testimonies as a main narrative thread, allowing audiences to explore the clues through an embodied hapticity instead of laying out the information bare. As a result, as Sanz summarises, "The importance of the testimony, normally rich in the historical report of documentary cinema, is reduced in *Los Rubios* to a nearly anecdotal presence" ("La importancia del testimonio, normalmente privilegiado en el relato histórico del cine documental, es reducida en *Los Rubios* hasta tener una presencia casi anecdótica"; 127; my translation).

Nonetheless, to comply with the INCAA's request, some testimonies given by her parents' colleagues were included in the final cut, but, just like the haptic photographs, these testimonies are played with. Rather than presenting the videos non-diegetically, in a static interview format, they are filmed on top of a television and recorded as they show on the screen. With a cold, blue-tinted colour palette and pixelated texture, the tactile image becomes more evident. Sometimes, it is Couceyro watching the television, embodying the act of looking. Other times, the television is so close that its edges disappear. In the testimonies themselves, despite the camera's proximity to the subject, it becomes difficult

to visually analyse them, as the liminality of the playback being played on the TV acts as a physical barrier between the audience and the testimonies. Muffled or at times silent audio makes the dialogue incomprehensible, allowing the texture to speak more than the voice.

By highlighting this separation, Carri achieves two things: first, she demonstrates the performativity of testimonies, aligning with Couceyro's analysis of a traditional 'heroic' iconography that foregrounds a specific political ideology. Second, as Nouzeilles affirms, "By opposing Montonero memory, ... [Carri] affirms her right to read the text of the past from a different perspective" (274). Rejecting external pressure to tell her story within the political dichotomy often promoted by institutions, Carri adopts a new post-memory perspective from the first generation growing up with active and lively consequences of such a complex conflict. Here, aiming to explore the consequences of succumbing to the institutional bias behind their collective memory, Carri highlights the system's limitations by encouraging a haptic reflexivity.

This reflexivity also undermines the effectiveness of the "universal 'code' underlying performances of memory" (Kuhn 307). Like most memory texts, *Los Rubios* constantly suggests that not all evidence can be interpreted and understood through conventional methods, because despite the materiality of the evidence being repeated, its contextual background shifts the meaning depending on where the material lies in space and time. While it would have been conventional to reconstruct an image of Carri's parents through the testimonies of their guerrillero friends, they would've become the type of evidence earlier referred to as "red herring" (Marks 44), inclining more towards Benjamin's historicism that avoids an unvarnished causality. This would shift away the attention from the political implications responsible for the gaps of a fragile collective memory and fall back into the representational bias that affirms the political dichotomy of the Dirty War.

Furthermore, Pignuoli expands this argument, suggesting that this approach to filmmaking among post-memory generations offers an insider's perspective that rejects the "unidirectional process where new generations do whatever they must to mirror their predecessors" ("un proceso unidireccional donde la nueva generación hace lo que sea necesario hacer para llegar a ser como la generación predecesora"; 335; my translation). As Pignuoli suggests, collective memory should not focus only on preserving a legacy but also

on allowing history to flow and be recontextualised, a shapeshifting process where the past is both questioned and learned from by aligning with Benjamin's "time of now".

Overall, *Los Rubios* concludes that certain aspects of this history do remain unrepresentable. From institutional intervention, which shapes a biased collective memory, to the limits of human memory itself, reconstructing and solidifying a nation's events is no easy task, not even when narrowed down to a single family's history. Yet for Carri, this fluidity is not a dead end; as Ocasio et al. propose, it can be a "positioning of collective memory as a critical, multi-staged process through which logics emerge and evolve" (692). It is a history that aims not just to evidence and reconstruct for the sake of a singular truth, but rather to support an evaluation of the societal logics that have driven the events leading to the present. By utilising the memory text, the gaps of Carri's investigation are presented narratively through a haptic language that connects with audiences through the body. As viewers are spoken to from within, the body becomes the archivist reconstructing not just from logic, but also from emotion. History becomes more than a political dichotomy, more than institutionalised labels; it becomes part of one's inner self, a universal capacity to be a critical historian, able to understand the way the heliotropic flower stems into the sun, and what this process means for one's existence today.

Conclusion

Los Rubios is a documentary that surpasses traditional portrayals not only of the documentary genre but also of the institutional narratives that have depicted and developed the Argentine dirty war as part of a political dichotomy. Albertina Carri's role as a member of the post-memory generation enabled an internal processing of personal and public information; ultimately, the insights gained during production contributed to something greater. Through an appraisal of the memory text suggested by Kuhn, it becomes clear that, indeed, Benjamin's chronicler is an unattainable figure. Thus, *Los Rubios* transforms into an analysis of a nation's division, ruled by fear and confusion, that has facilitated the institutionalisation of its collective trauma. This divisive contradiction prevents reconciliation and deepens the wounds inflicted by the brutality of the military dictatorship. As a response, a haptic visuality is employed to materialise a link between the

embodied acts of looking, feeling, and hearing, and the liminal spaces of those ungraspable fragments of history that spill between human fingers, all of which leads to a new approach to reconstructing past events.

Audiovisual communication offers endless opportunities to question our inner selves' perception of a fixed reality; in the case of *Los Rubios*, the piece proposes embodiment as an alternative, a less institutionalised way of processing information. By feeling that ungraspable liminality through a tactile vision, one can acknowledge the necessary path towards Benjamin's critical historian. This entails the necessity to understand how history has been shaped and how that has impacted what one understands as the past and the present. And most importantly, how these two matters intertwine to impact one's now-time. More than ever, under the current globalised and technocentric era, the surplus of information and the unreliability of statements proclaimed truths argue for a necessity to embody the critical historian. Epistemologically, there are critical tools available at one's disposal to challenge rigid perceptions; Albertina Carri proves through *Los Rubios* that cinema can be one of them.

Works Cited

- Alter, Nora M., and Timothy Corrigan. "Introduction." *Essays on the Essay Film*, edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, Columbia UP, 2017, pp. 1–18.
- Bartalini, Carolina. "Sacarle fotos a las fotos: La fotografía como materia y acto en *Los rubios*, de Albertina Carri." *Revista Digital: Artes, Letras y Humanidades*, vol. 10, no. 21, 2021, pp. 7–18.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner, Routledge, 2020, pp. 255–63.
- Blejmar, Jordana. "Toying with History: Playful Memory in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*." *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2013, pp. 44–61.
- Breckenridge, Janis. "Performing Memory and Identity: Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*." *Letras Femeninas*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2008, pp. 11–27.
- Carri, Albertina, director. *Los Rubios*. Primer Plano Film, 2003.
- Crenzel, Emilio. "Between the Voices of the State and the Human Rights Movement: *Never Again* and the Memories of the Disappeared in Argentina." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2011, pp. 1063–76.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103–28.
- Kuhn, Annette. "Memory Texts and Memory Work: Performances of Memory in and with Visual Media." *Memory Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2010, pp. 298–313.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Nouzeilles, Gabriela. "Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the Past in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2005, pp. 263–78.
- Ocasio, William, et al. "History, Society, and Institutions: The Role of Collective Memory in the Emergence and Evolution of Societal Logics." *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2016, pp. 676–99.
- Pignuoli, Sergio O. "Lenguaje ideológico y autorreferencia de *Los rubios* de Albertina Carri." *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2013, pp. 324–37.
- Robben, Antonius C. G. M. "How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2005, pp. 120–64.

Sanz, Álvaro M. "Distanciando la memoria: El fracaso de la estrategia antitrauma en *Los rubios* (2003) de Albertina Carri." *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2022, pp. 122–38.

Swalwell, Melanie. "The Senses and Memory in Intercultural Cinema." *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2002.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	The Mediated Body: Memory and Performativity in the Journalistic Biography of David Bowie
Author	Carlos Augusto Pereira dos Santos Júnior and Marta Regina Maia
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

The Mediated Body: Memory and Performativity in the Journalistic Biography of David Bowie

Carlos Augusto Pereira dos Santos Júnior and Marta Regina Maia

St Mary's University, Fluminense Federal University, and University of São Paulo

*This article examines how journalistic biography contributes to the construction of mediated public figures through an analysis of Wendy Leigh's *Bowie: The Biography* (2014). Combining narrative analysis with close reading, the study investigates how memory, testimony and representations of the performative body interact in the narration of David Bowie's life. Leigh's account is read alongside selected works by Paul Trynka, Dylan Jones and James Rovira to identify how different source choices and narrative emphases produce distinct versions of Bowie and his cultural meaning. The analysis finds that Leigh's biography constructs continuity retrospectively, arranging testimonies about childhood, family relations and embodied difference as early signs of Bowie's later artistic practices. It also shows how his clothing, gestures, public statements about sexuality and visual self-presentation are narrativised within a largely celebratory account of cultural transgression. These representations do not recover an identity that precedes mediation. They produce a mediated body through the organisation of testimony, affective memory and public imagery. The article argues that journalistic biography should be understood as a form of cultural production that selects and reconfigures the past, establishes the terms through which embodied identity becomes intelligible, and participates in the posthumous construction of public memory.*

1. Introduction

In a period marked by a rupture in canonical representations of masculinity and femininity, it becomes pertinent to foreground figures who have actively challenged normative frameworks through the body as a site of inscription, performance, and contestation. David Bowie stands as a paradigmatic case: a performer whose name, image, music, and artistry became globally recognisable and culturally enduring (Leigh 13).¹ Widely recognised as a composer and musical performer, Bowie extended his practice into theatre

¹ In journalism, the use of lived experience stories is increasingly valued for its ability to provide personal and nuanced insights into social issues. These narratives help humanise news coverage and foster a deeper connection with audiences.

and cinema, consolidating a cross-media presence in which the body operates as a central mediating force among identity, image, and cultural memory. Years following his passing, that physical form remains a site of ongoing construction and hermeneutic reconfiguration. Through the proliferation of journalistic biographies, his embodied heritage is made culturally intelligible, becoming a narrativised presence that endures within contemporary regimes of visibility and mediated recollection.

Central to this article's engagement with Bowie is the concept of performativity, which is employed here in a precise theoretical sense, distinct from the more general notion of performance. Whereas performance typically denotes the act of presenting or enacting an identity before an audience, as a deliberate, conscious staging, performativity, as developed by Judith Butler, refers to the repetitive processes through which identity is constituted rather than simply expressed (*Gender* 34, 191–92). In this sense, Bowie did not merely perform a series of personas; rather, his repeated corporeal acts, across gender presentation, visual experimentation, and public self-fashioning, participated in the ongoing constitution of a subject that exceeded any single, stable identity. This aspect of Bowie's practice makes performativity central to our analysis of his work. In this context, instead of expressing a pre-constituted self, his body takes shape as a space where the terms of an intelligible personhood are repeatedly produced, contested, and reconfigured.

The lives of artists whose work departs from established aesthetic conventions are increasingly mediated through editorial forms, particularly within the expanding field of contemporary biography. This tendency is especially visible in writing on Bowie, which includes biographies, memoirs, and critical studies concerned with his public trajectory, artistic development, and the accounts of those who experienced some degree of proximity to him. Key examples include *Bowie: A Biography* by Marc Spitz (2009), which follows his trajectory from post-war Britain to international fame; *Starman: David Bowie* by Paul Trynka (2010), a detailed study of his artistic development; *David Bowie: A Life* by Dylan Jones (2017), which draws on interviews and archival materials; and critical works such as *David Bowie and Romanticism* by James Rovira (2022), which places Bowie within wider discussions of identity, gender and selfhood. Against this larger body of writing, the selection of *Bowie: The Biography* by Wendy Leigh (2014) is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of Bowie's life or its many interpretations. The book instead offers a focused point of entry into the ways his

presence across performance, film and everyday life is constructed and interpreted through biographical discourse. Reading Leigh's account alongside the wider biographical field also allows for an examination of how it reproduces, revises, or departs from established narratives of Bowie.

This study examines how journalistic biography contributes to the discursive construction of the mediated body, taking Leigh's account as its primary focus and introducing other biographies where comparison clarifies the analysis. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Aleida Assmann, alongside Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, J. L. Austin, Brian Massumi, and Sara Ahmed, the article considers how memory, testimony, affect, and bodily self-presentation shape the narration of Bowie's life. It approaches journalistic biography as a form of cultural production through which embodied identity becomes intelligible.

The study adopts narrative analysis to examine the relationship between memory, testimony, and the performative body in biographical representation. Instead of considering biography as a transparent account of an already constituted life, it focuses on how narrative structures organise and reconfigure lived experience. This approach draws on Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski's concept of media witnessing, which describes witnessing performed in, by, and through media and highlights how media position witnesses and audiences in relation to represented events (1–4). Biographical narratives are therefore read as testimonial constructions situated within particular media, historical, and discursive contexts. The analysis focuses on two related processes: the organisation of memory, through which experience acquires meaning from the standpoint of the present, and the discursive constitution of the performative body, examined principally through Butler, Massumi, and Ahmed. Together, these perspectives inform the following research question: How do memory and representations of the performative body interact in the journalistic construction of David Bowie's life?

Works by Trynka, Jones, Rovira, and Spitz are introduced comparatively, where they clarify Leigh's narrative choices or situate them within the wider biographical field. These works are not treated as equivalent objects of analysis, but as points of comparison that reveal how different sources and narrative priorities produce different versions of Bowie. Attention is also given to the material and narrative possibilities of the biographical book as a

media form. Unlike daily journalism, book-length biography permits sustained engagement with temporality and with the affective, social, and relational dimensions of a life. The following section establishes this framework by examining how journalistic narrative organises temporality and mediates embodied memory.

2. Narrative, Journalism, and the Mediation of Embodied Memory

Contemporary culture has assigned increasing importance to the individual as both the subject and object of representation. Practices of self-exposure now circulate widely across social media, journalism, and other forms of cultural production, altering the conditions under which visibility and subjectivity are organised. The award of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature to Annie Ernaux offers one literary expression of this tendency. Her autobiographical writing uses personal experience to examine historical processes, class relations, and social life (“Nobel Prize”).² Although such writing can address collective and political experience, the self remains the principal point of its narrative organisation. A related logic can be identified in other forms, including journalistic biography.

Self-representation has a much longer history. Svetlana Alpers reads Rembrandt’s later self-portraits as works in which the artist increasingly identifies the self with painting itself, ultimately “defining the self in paint” (116). The contemporary difference lies in the reach and speed of such practices under digital conditions, where the circulation of self-images through online platforms has unsettled the distinction between recorded appearance and constructed representation. This problem also bears upon Bowie’s biographical afterlife. Photographs, performances, and film footage continue to circulate across digital platforms, where they are removed from earlier contexts and made to signify differently within new interpretative settings. Paula Sibilia examines this demand for visibility through what she calls an alter-directed subjectivity, in which the image of the self is produced to be seen and to generate effects in the gaze of others (244). Within this system, subjects fictionalise the self as if it were constantly being filmed, turning personality into a spectacle oriented toward the gaze of

² Annie Ernaux is a French author known for her exploration of autobiographical and autofictional writing. Her works often delve into personal memory and identity, reflecting on social and historical contexts. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2022 for her innovative approach to personal narrative.

others (258). Her argument is pertinent to Bowie, whose public identity developed through a sustained and deliberate engagement with mediated visibility. Journalistic biographies extend this process by selecting, arranging, and interpreting the materials through which his persona remains culturally legible.

In this sense, following Ricoeur, narrative is a form through which past events are reorganised and made intelligible within a particular temporal order (32, 85). Assmann's distinction between memory as *ars*, concerned with storage and preservation, and memory as *vis*, understood as the reactivation of the past in response to present concerns, further defines this process (33–34). The latter guides this study, since biographical writing does not preserve experience unchanged but selects and rearranges it within the cultural present. Leigh's biography forms part of the retrospective engagement that followed Bowie's death in January 2016, contributing to the continuing reinterpretation of his life and its cultural meaning.

This study, therefore, approaches journalism as both an agent of memory and a producer of meaning. Meaning develops through engagement with the present, but it also depends on the organisation of life narratives and on the testimonial claims associated with journalistic practice. As Beatriz Sarlo argues, remembrance is inseparable from the present of enunciation and from the subjectivity that remembers, so the past is narrated from a position shaped by the present (49). Journalistic biography participates in this process by giving the past narrative form and constituting its subject as a culturally intelligible figure. The following analysis examines how this constitution takes place through the representation of Bowie's body, his performances, and the media discourses that continue to organise their meaning.

3. The Body, Journalism, and Performativity

Within journalism and media studies, the body has become a central site for the organisation of representation, evidence, and contested meaning. Journalistic narratives have treated the body as both an object of documentation and a surface upon which social norms are imposed, reproduced, and resisted. Drawing on Foucault, John Tagg, and Allan Sekula, Fredrik Bjercknes notes that photography has historically been used to regulate social deviance

through surveillance, archiving, and identification (953). The killing of George Floyd provides a contemporary example of how non-professional videos can become evidentiary materials in digital investigative journalism, where footage is reconstructed, cross-referenced, and scrutinised rather than treated as self-evident proof (Bjerknes 951, 962). Franz Anton Cramer approaches the body through the metaphor of the “body as archive”, arguing that bodily materiality can accumulate traces of knowledge whose meanings extend beyond immediate physical activity (220). Although Cramer develops this argument in relation to dance, the formulation offers a vocabulary for thinking about how bodily traces acquire meaning through later acts of interpretation. Tamar Ashuri and Pinchevski conceptualise witnessing as a field shaped by contest and struggle, treating it as an inherently political practice whose form depends on the specific event witnessed (135). Similar processes operate in biographical writing, where the subject’s body takes form through selection, emphasis, and narrative mediation.

The body is also understood here through Butler’s account of performativity, in which gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (*Gender* 34). As Butler further puts it, “gender is always a doing”, rather than the expression of an identity that precedes its enactment (*Gender* 34). The body thus bears cultural and social practices sedimented through repetition and normative regulation. Massumi’s account of affect extends this understanding by addressing the body’s capacity to register intensities before they acquire conscious or representational form (28). Affect refers, in this sense, to the capacity of bodies to affect and to be affected. Journalistic biography must translate such sensory and emotional dimensions into narratives without reducing them to explicit statements or stable meanings. Ahmed shifts this discussion toward the social circulation of emotion, arguing that “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (8). Emotions therefore move between bodies, objects and signs, shaping how particular figures come to be experienced as threatening, desirable, or transgressive. In Bowie’s case, these approaches direct attention to the affective force of his public image. His bodily self-fashioning produced responses that exceeded conscious interpretation and has helped sustain his cultural presence across different generations.

Bodies are differently positioned within regimes of social intelligibility. Butler’s discussion of *Paris Is Burning*, for example, shows how norms of class, race, gender, and sexuality

structure the categories through which bodies are recognised and performed (*Bodies* 88). Yet corporeal practices may also expose and contest the norms governing their intelligibility. Glam rock, which developed in Britain around the turn of the 1970s, mobilised theatricality, androgyny, and visual excess in ways that unsettled established understandings of gender and sexuality (Auslander 34; Reynolds 13). Bowie occupied a central position within this formation. His engagement with performativity did not consist of conscious theatrical display. Rather, repeated bodily acts, gestures, costumes, and personae participated in the continuing production of identity. As Cramer observes:

Performative aspects exert a fundamental influence on our contemporary culture. The practice of ‘performance’ has become a hybrid medium of contemporaneity, encompassing issues far beyond dance, drama and aesthetics. Stability, normativity and authorship are concepts that are called radically into question by ‘performance’. (220)

Cramer’s formulation also applies to journalistic biography. Biographical writing does not merely describe its subject but produces effects through the ways it names, orders, and connects events. Austin’s theory of speech acts establishes that language performs actions rather than simply representing existing realities, shaping perceptions and social relations. He defines the performative precisely on this basis: “[T]he issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action, it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin 6). Foucault develops this position by treating discourse and power as constitutive of subjects and of their relation to their bodies, since “power relations have an immediate hold upon the body; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks” (25). Viewed in these terms, Leigh’s biography does not recover an intact Bowie who exists outside representation. The following section explains how these theoretical premises inform the methodological approach adopted in the analysis of Leigh’s book.

4. Analysis: Memory and the Mediated Body in *Bowie: The Biography*

4.1 Memory as Narrative Construction

Leigh’s treatment of her sources is itself relevant to the analysis. Near the end of *Bowie: The Biography*, she identifies, chapter by chapter, the individuals consulted and the materials

used, including interviews, archival documents, films, and journalistic accounts. This source apparatus brings heterogeneous materials into a sustained biographical narrative. As a *dispositif*, the book collects, selects, and orders these materials, producing a narrative framework within which Bowie's life becomes culturally intelligible.

Memory, the first axis of the analysis, is constructed largely through testimonies concerning Bowie's familial and social relationships. Leigh introduces him early in the biography as a figure defined by estrangement and identification with others positioned outside accepted social norms. She writes, "David felt like an outcast, a pariah, and his sympathies have always veered toward the underdog, those who walk on the wild side" (Leigh 9). More than a biographical detail, the statement provides an interpretative frame through which later events are organised, encouraging the reader to understand Bowie's artistic and bodily experiments as extensions of an enduring relation to difference. Memory functions here in Assmann's sense of *vis*. The past is reactivated from the standpoint of the present and arranged in ways that give earlier experiences a retrospective meaning.

Accounts of Bowie's childhood follow this narrative pattern. Leigh recalls that his schoolmates called him "the devil" and that he was physically punished for writing with his left hand (8). Within the biography, these episodes acquire meaning through their relation to the adult Bowie. Experiences of punishment and exclusion are placed within a longer account of embodied difference, making childhood appear as the point from which his later challenges to social and aesthetic norms can be understood. This structure risks imposing coherence retrospectively, since the meaning of the childhood episode is produced through knowledge of the life that followed. For Sarlo, testimony is inseparable from the self-designation of the subject who was present when the events occurred, while the narrating subject assigns meaning to the details included in the account (50). Ahmed's account of emotion helps explain how feelings circulate among bodies, signs, and readers instead of remaining contained within the individual subject. As Ahmed writes, emotions can be understood through "an analysis of affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (8). In Leigh's narrative, this circulation is visible in Bowie's recollection of childhood punishment: "At school, I remember very distinctly kids laughing at me because I would draw and write with my left hand", where a remembered

scene of bodily difference is offered to readers for their affective response and folded into the wider narrative of Bowie's later transgressions (qtd. in Leigh 8).

The accounts of punishment and exclusion invite affective responses through which Bowie's early difference becomes culturally meaningful. With no direct access to childhood experience, the text constructs an affective relation to it through remembered scenes, attributed speech, and their placement within the wider trajectory of the biography. Family relationships provide another source through which this trajectory is assembled. Bowie's father is associated with the development of his intellectual interests. Bowie recalled: "My father opened up my world because he taught me the habit of reading" (qtd. in Leigh 22). His mother, Peggy, occupies a more ambivalent position in Leigh's account. She appears as artistically inclined but emotionally distant and this distance is presented as formative. Leigh also depicts Peggy as a voracious reader and poet whose emotional distance shaped Bowie's childhood. Bowie recalled that a compliment from her was "very hard to come by" and that, when he took out his paints, she would warn him not to make a mess (qtd. in Leigh 23).

This account creates a tension between affinity and emotional separation. Peggy and Bowie share artistic inclinations, but the narrative denies this similarity in the form of a supportive relationship. Leigh instead places maternal distance within an account of Bowie's artistic formation. The quotation attributed to Bowie is especially important because it allows his later recollection to determine the meaning of the earlier scene. His memory interprets it and supplies the terms through which the reader encounters the relationship. Leigh's emphasis differs from the organisation of other major accounts. Jones's *David Bowie: A Life* draws extensively on collaborators and figures from the music industry, constructing Bowie through a broad range of remembered encounters. Trynka's *Starman* gives greater weight to musical contexts, professional relationships, and creative development. In contrast, Leigh devotes more sustained attention to familial experience and its emotional interpretation, a distinction which concerns more than mere subject matter. Each biography establishes different criteria for deciding which memories and relationships are relevant to the construction of Bowie's life. Leigh's choices foreground intimate experience as an interpretative resource and demonstrate how the book format can sustain connections between personal memory, artistic formation, and public identity.

4.2 The Performative Body

The second axis concerns the body as a site of performativity. Leigh traces Bowie's visual self-fashioning to childhood, recounting his use of make-up at around three, his enjoyment of dressing up as a young child, and his later experiments with hair colour and eyebrow shape (27–28, 36). These recollections create a continuity between the young David Jones and the public figure he later became through their placement within the biography, without demonstrating a stable childhood identity. Early bodily practices are interpreted retrospectively through Bowie's adult use of dress, gesture, and visual transformation. The resulting coherence is therefore produced as much by Leigh's narrative arrangement as by the life it describes.

A similar process is evident when Leigh recounts Bowie's childhood performances. His mother remembered that he "would tell everyone to be quiet and listen, and then fling himself about to the music" (qtd. in Leigh 28). The scene places the body at the centre of an emerging relationship between performance, attention, and social presence, tying the command of attention and bodily movement directly to the emergence of a public, performative self. In this way, Leigh's narrative arrangement seeks to impose a retrospective unity on Bowie's life and career. Yet Butler's account of performativity prompts us to question that unity, since it treats identity as produced through repeated acts rather than as a coherence that can be read back into a life. Bowie's body is thus better understood as a performative means of establishing a position from which a recognisable self can emerge, rather than as the vehicle of an interior identity. Massumi's account of affect, moreover, helps explain how Bowie's bodily presentation generated responses that exceeded the explicit meanings attached to particular costumes, gestures, or identity categories (28). Leigh's biography can only access these encounters through remembered reactions and retrospective interpretations, so the affective body it constructs is already mediated by language and temporal distance. This relationship between embodiment and reception is especially visible in her treatment of gender and sexuality. Leigh explicitly frames Bowie's declarations about being gay and bisexual, his public use of dresses, and his openness about

sexuality as acts that challenged accepted sexual norms and enabled some fans to understand their own sexual difference differently (9).

Leigh assigns these acts an emancipatory meaning, moving from Bowie's public statements and bodily presentation to a broad claim about their effects on audiences. This framing requires caution because it gathers declarations and practices from different contexts and orders them into a coherent narrative of sexual transgression, while giving limited attention to Bowie's later revisions of some of these statements. His 1972 declaration to *Melody Maker*, "I'm gay and always have been, even when I was David Jones", is a case in point (qtd. in Leigh 112). In a 1997 interview marking his fiftieth birthday, Bowie recast the declaration as a strategic gesture, saying "I did it more out of bravado. I wanted people to be aware of me. I didn't want to live my life behind a closed door" (qtd. in Leigh 113).³ Even so, it shows how biography presents clothing, speech, and public appearance as acts that make sexual norms visible and contestable. Madonna's recollection that Bowie's gender ambiguity influenced her provides one specific example of this reception. Recalling the concert as a formative event, she describes its lasting effect: "[T]his beautiful, androgynous man, just being so perverse ... as David Byrne so beautifully put it: so unconventional, defying logic and basically blowing my mind. Anyway, I came home a changed woman" (qtd. in Leigh 251). Her testimony shows how Bowie's image entered another artist's understanding of gender and performance. In Ahmed's terms, its affective force emerges through circulation, repetition, and later recollection.

Rovira's *David Bowie and Romanticism* places Bowie's transformations within literary and philosophical traditions concerned with selfhood and artistic reinvention, while Leigh's account remains closer to embodied episodes and the memories attached to their reception. The altered appearance of Bowie's pupil following an adolescent injury provides a useful example. Far from treating this feature as an incidental physical detail, the biography incorporates it into the explanation of his visual distinctiveness. Leigh records that Bowie's "unmatched eyes also lent his gaze a hypnotic quality", and notes that Bowie himself came to embrace the injury as part of his image, admitting that he "quite enjoyed that as a badge of

³ The 1997 interview appeared in the BBC radio programme *Changes: Bowie at 50*, broadcast to mark his fiftieth birthday.

honor” (qtd. in Leigh 37). This framing also operates materially at the level of the book: the biography's own cover foregrounds Bowie's face with the distinctive eye made prominent, so that an accidental injury is reframed as a defining element of his recognisable public image.

Bowie's own testimony occupies a substantial place within this process. Statements drawn from interviews, public appearances, and recorded accounts recur throughout Leigh's biography, often allowing his retrospective self-description to organise the meaning of earlier events. One instance is Bowie's recollection of his mother's response to his early artistic efforts, which reframes a childhood relationship in light of the artist he would become: “A compliment from her was very hard to come by. I would get my paints out and all she would say was, ‘I hope you're not going to make a mess’” (qtd. in Leigh 23). This reliance on self-report creates an analytical problem, for it leads the biography to reproduce the terms through which Bowie sought to represent himself. Yet this limitation also reveals something central to the mediated body. Bowie entered the biographical record after decades of deliberate self-presentation, revision, and commentary upon his own image. Leigh, therefore, writes about a subject who had already participated extensively in the production of the materials through which he would later be interpreted. The mediated body emerges from this unstable relationship between bodily practice, public circulation, remembered responses, and biographical arrangement. In this way, the function of Leigh's text is to add a further narrative layer to a life already constituted through performance and mediation.

5. Conclusions

In the final chapter of the 2016 edition of *Bowie: The Biography*, Wendy Leigh describes her subject as “the man who changed the world, the man who wooed the world, beguiled the world, and ultimately won the world” (269). Through its syntactic repetition and escalating claims, the sentence elevates Bowie from a biographical subject to a figure of near-mythic authority. It also demonstrates how biography can impose coherence and resolution upon a life whose meanings remain fragmented, disputed, and subject to revision. At the same time, journalistic biography should be understood as a partial and situated narrative, produced through selections, emphases, and omissions, and therefore always read from the present. It

can reactivate a life as an object of inquiry, opening space for new investigations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of a biographical trajectory, without leaving it fixed in the past. The question addressed in this article is therefore not whether Bowie “changed the world”, but how journalistic and biographical practices make such an assertion culturally intelligible.

This analysis has shown that memory and representations of the performative body are mutually constitutive within Leigh’s account. Far from a stable repository from which the past can be retrieved unchanged, memory selectively arranges testimonies from relatives, collaborators, and Bowie himself, ordering and interpreting them from the standpoint of the present. Through this arrangement, childhood experiences of exclusion, punishment, and bodily difference acquire retrospective importance as early signs of the artist Bowie would later become. Leigh’s narrative creates a continuity between these episodes and his adult practices, even where the available materials cannot establish such continuity independently of their biographical organisation.

The body undergoes a related process of narrative construction. Leigh arranges childhood scenes involving dance, make-up, and clothing so that they anticipate Bowie’s later engagement with performance, gender, and visual self-presentation. His body appears as the site through which identity becomes recognisable, but the coherence of this development is produced retrospectively. Public statements about sexuality, appearances in dresses, and changes in persona are grouped within an emancipatory account of cultural transgression. This framing makes Bowie’s bodily practices legible as challenges to sexual and gender norms, although its celebratory tone can limit critical examination of the contradictions surrounding these acts and their changing historical meanings.

A comparison with Jones, Trynka, and Rovira’s works shows that Bowie’s biographical identity shifts according to the sources selected and the questions each work poses. Leigh’s emphasis on familial memory and embodied difference produces one version of Bowie among several, none of which can fully contain the life it narrates. Journalistic biography should therefore be understood as a form of cultural production that organises testimony, memory, and the body. The mediated Bowie remains open to revision, as these materials circulate and are interpreted through new narratives and media forms. By drawing attention to this process,

this study has sought to provide a useful basis for further research on journalistic biography, mediated bodies, and the posthumous construction of public figures.

Acknowledgements

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001, through the Programa Institucional de Doutorado Sanduíche no Exterior (PDSE).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Alpers, Svetlana. *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Ashuri, Tamar, and Amit Pinchevski. "Witnessing as a Field". *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, edited by Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 133–157.
- Assmann, Aleida. *Espaços da Recordação: Formas de Transformação da Memória Cultural*. Editora da Unicamp, 2011.
- Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. University of Michigan Press, 2006.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Bjerknes, Fredrik. "Images of Transgressions: Visuals as Reconstructed Evidence in Digital Investigative Journalism". *Journalism Studies*, vol. 23, no. 8, 2022, pp. 951–973.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.
- Cramer, Franz Anton. "Body, Archive". *Dance [and] Theory*, vol. 25, 2014, pp. 219–22. Transcript Verlag, <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839421512.219>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Frosh, Paul, and Amit Pinchevski, editors. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Jones, Dylan. *David Bowie: A Life*. Crown Archetype, 2017.
- Leigh, Wendy. *Bowie: The Biography*. Gallery Books, 2016.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy*. Dey Street Books, 2016.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Tempo e Narrativa*. Translated by Claudia Berliner, WMF Martins Fontes, 2010.
- Rovira, James. "David Bowie and Romantic Androgyny". *David Bowie and Romanticism*, edited by James Rovira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 31–52.

- Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carole S. Vance, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 267–319.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. *Tempo Passado: Cultura da Memória e Guinada Subjetiva*. Companhia das Letras, 2007.
- Sekula, Allan. "The Body and the Archive". *October*, no. 39, 1986, pp. 3–64.
- Sibilia, Paula. *O Show do Eu: A Intimidade como Espetáculo*. Editora Nova Fronteira, 2008.
- Spitz, Marc. *Bowie: A Biography*. Crown Publishing Group, 2009.
- Tagg, John. "Evidence, Truth and Order: A Means of Surveillance". *Visual Culture: The Reader*, edited by Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans, Sage, 1999, pp. 244–273.
- "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2022". *NobelPrize.org*, Nobel Prize Outreach, 6 Oct. 2022, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/press-release/>.
- Trynka, Paul. *Starman: David Bowie*. Sphere, 2011.



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	The Aesthetics of Displacement: Sensory Experience and Cultural Translation in Transnational Cinema
Author	Shiyuan Zhang
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

The Aesthetics of Displacement: Sensory Experience and Cultural Translation in Transnational Cinema

Shiyuan Zhang

University of Cambridge

This article examines how cultural displacement is sensorially tangible in two transnational films: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Memoria (2021) and Olivier Assayas's Irma Vep (1996). While existing scholarship on transnational cinema tends to foreground narrative representations of dislocation or industrial analyses of cross-border production, this essay develops the original concept of 'sensory disorientation' to argue that such approaches overlook the corporeal dimensions of film form, which are the ways of sensing; the disoriented body becomes the primary site through which cultural displacement is corporeally inhabited and communicated. Drawing on this framework, I trace how sonic estrangement in Memoria and visual transgression in Irma Vep transform abstract experiences of cultural dislocation into embodied encounters for viewers. The article further examines how the transnational production context, including funding structures, star personae, and distribution strategies materialise as an aesthetic form. These films propose a model of sensory transnationalism in which bodily engagement beyond linguistic comprehension becomes the primary medium of cross-cultural translation.

The massive population movements of the twentieth century have occurred alongside the development of the film as an art form. Since the 1980s, as the sociologist Avtar Brah observes, migrations across the world have proliferated, with diasporic communities becoming "exemplary communities of the transnational moment", "diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (93, 205). During this period, films embodying cross-border movement have gradually taken on a more significant role in the global film market as well. The scholarship of transnational cinema has often focused its analysis on narrative representations of cultural dislocation or industry-level productions of cross-border production networks. This approach frequently overlooks how the sensory dimensions of film form and the bodily interactions with the audience materialise cultural displacement and how displacement is organised through film form and bodily perception.

This essay examines how the experience of cultural displacement is embodied through multisensory strategies in two films: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021) and Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep* (1996). I introduce the concept of 'sensory disorientation' to interpret the specific process through which transnational cinema renders cultural displacement not only as narrative content, but as an embodied and tangible experience shared between character and viewer. Sara Ahmed's phenomenology describes how "disorientation allows bodies to extend into spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible", demonstrating how these films transform cultural estrangement from limitation into creative possibility and a bodily mode of knowing (11). I also draw on Laura Marks' haptic visuality and Vivian Sobchack's film phenomenology, which describe how the body perceives images. Sensory disorientation specifies what happens when that perception is estranged across cultural and linguistic difference: when the sensing body itself becomes the site of untranslatability. This is also where the concept adds more to accented and transnational cinema scholarship. These two films echo with each other as analytical complements and map sensory disorientation from both directions: *Memoria* positions the displaced body as a receptor of sensory intrusion, *Irma Vep* presents it as the agent of sensory disruption.

Beyond the immediate audiovisual estrangement of the displaced body, I argue that these sensory strategies emerge not only as artistic choices but as registers of the power dynamics and creative tensions inherent in the material conditions of transnational filmmaking. By examining how these films engage with themes of memory, identity, and cultural untranslatability through distinct sights and sounds with a sensory approach, this essay demonstrates how transnational cinema can create new aesthetic forms precisely through the productive tensions that arise in the attempt to translate across cultural boundaries. Sensory disorientation thus extends beyond present perception into memory and into the material conditions of production – the three registers this essay traces in turn.

1. Sensory Disorientation and the Estranged Body

1.1 Sonic and Visual Disorientation

Both *Memoria* and *Irma Vep* embrace innovative uses of sounds and images which transform the abstract concept of cultural displacement into tangible experience for both

characters and viewers. While the cinematic representations of cultural dislocation in some films rely on narrative exposition or dialogue, these two films materialise estrangement through the embodied experience of ‘sensory disorientation’. Yet each film locates this disorientation in a distinct formal mechanism. *Memoria* works primarily through acousmatic sound, where displacement is registered first as an interrupted, enigmatic auditory intrusion. *Irma Vep*, by contrast, works through spatial and visual instability. The characters navigate strange spaces and physically experience being out of place in both films. This audiovisual interplay transforms cross-cultural experience into pathways that invite audiences to actively experience being a stranger alongside the characters on screen.

Unlike Marks’ “haptic visuality”, which primarily focuses on visual textures that evoke tactile memories (162), sensory displacement can be emphasised as a hearing experience. In *Memoria*, Apichatpong¹ employs ‘sonic disorientation’ as a sub-category of the sensory dislocated experience. The protagonist, Jessica Holland (Tilda Swinton), is a Scottish botanist who is abruptly disturbed by a profound sonic disturbance during her stay in Bogotá to visit her sick sibling. The film creates an intense sense of displacement by positioning a mysterious “Bang—” sound in the interlayer between objective reality and subjective imagination, constantly disrupting Jessica’s sense of belonging. The loud noise echoes throughout the entire film, constantly reminding the audience of its presence, inviting the audience to navigate alongside the protagonist and follow the development of the film to join her immersively in the search for the source of the sound. This sets off a journey of fantasy, chance encounters, and reunions that echoes with memories and history. This sensory approach positions viewers to embody the disorientation of existing between cultural worlds and reflects Apichatpong’s comment that *Memoria* is a film made for the theatre with its unique sound effect experience (Weerasethakul “Interview”).

The opening sequence establishes sonic displacement through what Michel Chion terms “acousmatic sound”, which is a sound one hears without seeing its source (71). The unvisualised sound becomes the skeleton to the character’s journey. A long static take of a darkened bedroom with ambient nocturnal tranquillity is suddenly disrupted when Jessica is startled awake by an inexplicable sonic phenomenon (*Memoria*, 00:01:17–00:02:05). Through

¹ Following common Thai naming convention in which individuals are formally addressed by their given name rather than their surname, I refer to the director as Apichatpong throughout (see *Cultural Atlas*).

dim lighting that renders Jessica as a silhouette, her disorientation is visualised through formal elements rather than conventional emotional signifiers. The sound functions as the primary sensory channel to unfold the film narrative with the central enigma: “Where does this eerie sound come from?” It is established within the first minute and the striking echoes of “Bang—” are planted in Jessica’s and audiences’ minds.

Irma Vep develops a parallel strategy through ‘visual dislocation’, destabilising spatial perception to embody cultural disorientation. Assayas establishes Maggie Cheung’s displacement immediately through a chaotic arrival scene at a Parisian film studio, where the camera follows her through the office like a maze filled with unfamiliar faces speaking rapid French (*Irma Vep*, 00:02:02–00:05:40). The fragmented editing patterns also mimic Maggie’s sensory overwhelm, creating what Marks describes as “haptic space”, or the space perceived more as enveloping texture than visual clarity (166). This haptic approach positions viewers within Maggie’s experience of cultural disorientation rather than observing it from a distance. Her sense of alienation from the place is shown from her panicked and confused facial expression and her polite English greeting.

The contrasting sensory approaches in these films reveal different dimensions of cultural displacement. While *Memoria* employs sound as a metaphysical intrusion that disrupts Jessica’s discovery of the city of Bogotá, *Irma Vep* uses visual fragmentation to represent the more immediate, social dimensions of Maggie’s disorientation in the working environment. Although their perspectives as strangers are not identical, Jessica, as an expat, has more opportunities to engage with the environment. There are many scenes in the film where she explores public areas like the library, art exhibition, university, and hospital alone. By contrast Maggie, as an actress, is passively guided around Paris by her crew members and her mobility is limited due to her unfamiliarity with the city. Both films transform what would typically be abstract psychological states into concrete sensory experiences that viewers can relate to.

1.2 Embodied Disorientation: The Recording Studio Sequence in *Memoria*

The recording studio scene in *Memoria* demonstrates how sensory displacement materialises through both technological mediation and bodily experience. After being haunted by the mysterious “Bang—” sound for several sleepless nights, Jessica visits a

university sound studio where she meets Juan (Juan Pablo Urrego), a young sound engineer who helps her recreate the sound (*Memoria*, 00:18:20–00:30:22; see fig. 1). Their interaction with disorientation is marked by linguistic barriers, as Jessica's limited Spanish forces her to rely on simple vocabulary, gestures, and occasional English words to make herself clear. Apichatpong films the conversation in just two static shots: one framing Jessica and Juan from the front as they face the computer, the other taken from behind, letting us see the sound-editing software on the screen. The ambient noise of the studio drops away almost entirely, so that every test tone arrives against near-silence, and the small pauses between Jessica's corrections such as a slight frown or a hesitation before she speaks become as legible as the words themselves. This not only signals communicative failure, it also marks her body as foreign and renders her cultural displacement audible and therefore legible to those around her. As Chion notes, the out of sync in language moments of "linguistic desynchronization" highlight the awareness of sound as material, as the communication through sound samples here rather than purely semantic (103).



Fig. 1.

The sensory displacement in this scene is portrayed through three stages. First, Jessica visits Juan in the sound studio, where he attempts to recreate the mysterious sound she has been hearing. The studio space both connects her to and isolates her from her sonic memory. It offers the technical match to reproduce the sound that exists only in her memory. Jessica's subtle facial reactions are captured as Juan plays various electronic sounds through the studio speakers to show none of them match her memory. Her frustrated expressions show her

body's rejection of sensory approximations that fail to capture lived experience. In the second stage, Jessica attempts verbal description in Spanish, saying the sound is "very earthy, like from the core of the Earth". This strong, precise account is what Sobchack terms a "synaesthetic challenge": the attempt to translate across sensory modalities to describe the heaviness of the sound when direct communication fails (80). Unable to name the sound in a shared language, Jessica reaches for texture and weight of the sound as well as using body language to communicate with a consensus that Juan can also perceive. The description marks the gap between her subjective experience and Juan's technical understanding of sound. Then, the scene reaches its resolution when Juan produces a deep, resonant boom that causes Jessica to physically resonate. Apichatpong documents the entire process of producing the sound, including every minute shift in Jessica's expression of recognition, relief and confusion. This extended duration echoes what Gilles Deleuze calls a "direct time-image" where viewers experience time as pure duration rather than action and creates a space to feel the emotional transition with her (128).

The scene positions the body as both archive and medium for cross-cultural experience. Jessica's body holds a sensation but not an exact word, the felt weight and texture of a sound she cannot locate. She fails to translate the bodily sensation into verbal shared language, marking the gap between what a body has felt and a language that cannot hold it. Her attempt to communicate this memory is a process of sensory translation that acknowledges the impossibility of direct equivalence while still attempting to describe the sensation existing in the memory across cultural and linguistic boundaries, demonstrating how cultural displacement operates at a sensory level beyond intellectual understanding.

1.3 Transgressive Embodiment: The Hotel Prowling Sequence in *Irma Vep*

The hotel prowling sequence in *Irma Vep* provides a counterpoint to *Memoria's* sonic exploration through its radical visual embodiment of cultural displacement. This five-minute sequence marks a turning point in Maggie's relationship to both her character and the unfamiliar working environment (*Irma Vep*, 00:53:05–01:01:52). As Maggie leaves her hotel room, she changes into the black latex catsuit of Irma Vep. The film makes a radical technical shift here by switching from 35mm film to degraded video with low resolution. This abrupt

medium change corresponds to Marks' theory of "haptic effects [that] are media-specific", which acknowledges the sensory experience of encountering different representational materialities (173). The grainy video quality creates a visual analogue to Jessica's acoustic disturbance in *Memoria*, which both show the disruption of sensory continuity, materialising the experience of displacement.

The sequence progresses through distinct spatial transgressions which operate on three levels at once. At the level of the character, Maggie sneakily walks along the hotel hallway, her body moving unnaturally. The latex costume allows her to slide along the walls to avoid others. Then Maggie enters a hotel room where a guest is fully naked and having a private conversation on a phone call. At the level of the camera, the unstable handheld camerawork further destabilises spatial perception to highlight the location specificity. At the level of spectators, we are placed in the slightly uncomfortable position of the embodied experience of looking when one should not. However, I argue that beyond the viewers experiencing boundary transgressions, the characters themselves become active agents of sensory disruption. This dual focus on both spectatorship and character embodiment allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how transnational cinema creates the 'sensory disorientation' which positions viewers within the phenomenological reality of cultural displacement. Maggie surprisingly steals the jewellery of the guest in her room and goes to the balcony of the hotel on a heavily rainy night, then she throws the jewellery into the rain (see fig. 2).

The beginning of the next scene shows Maggie being woken up by the crew the next morning, still wearing the catsuit, making it difficult to distinguish whether this happened or was just Maggie's dream. This sequence visualises cultural displacement not as an abstract concept but as embodied transgression of spatial, social, and ethical boundaries. The cinematic techniques transform cultural displacement from intellectual concept into physical experience. Unlike *Memoria's* approach, which positions the body as a receptor of external sensory disturbance, *Irma Vep* presents the body itself as the agent of sensory disruption. Maggie's transformation into Irma Vep enables what performance theorist Rebecca Schneider calls "cross-temporal touching" (6). She presents a physical engagement that collapses distinctions between past and present, self and other, and blurs temporal and spatial boundaries. By embodying a character from French cinema, Maggie's performance

materialises the complex temporal and cultural dislocations inherent in transnational filmmaking.

The culmination of these sensory strategies demonstrates how both films transform cultural displacement from abstract concept into tangible, embodied experience through cinematic techniques. Whether with sound or sight, they both reveal that understanding cultural displacement requires not just intellectual comprehension but sensory engagement.



Fig. 2.

2. Disorientation in Memory: Through the Scope of Self-Reflexivity and Untranslatability

While sensory displacement materialises the immediate, present-tense experience of cultural displacement, the films extend this same logic backward into memory. In both films, memory is a sensory event; it returns through sound, texture, and the body's involuntary response. I argue that memory here operates as a temporal register of sensory disorientation, functioning as both a site of cultural untranslatability and a potential connection between cultural differences. The displaced bodies feel estrangement not just in the present but re-experience it through the same disoriented perception that resists translation. Both films stage this through self-reflexive techniques that transform Ahmed's "moments of disorientation" from abstract concepts into tangible sensory experiences, making the lived, abstract disorientation of cultural dislocation physically accessible to viewers (9).

As the title itself suggests, *Memoria* explicitly foregrounds memory as the core narrative structure, exploring how personal and collective memory intersect in post-conflict Colombia. Jessica's mysterious "Bang—" sound functions simultaneously as uncertain personal auditory hallucination and metaphorical echo of Colombia's violent history. As Javier Pérez-Osorio observes, the film registers this history not through direct exposition but through "an architecture of listening, sensing, and waiting", as such the sound embodies historical haunting and keeps Colombia's traumatic past "beneath the surface of the everyday" (215, 216). The film positions memory not as a reliable archive but as fragmented sensory intrusion that disrupts linear temporality. As Deleuze suggests in his discussion of the time-image, such disruptions create "sheets of past" that coexist with the present (99). Jessica's journey to identify the sound becomes an exploration of how memory operates across cultural boundaries such that her British expat experience connects with Colombia's collective trauma in ways that resist straightforward translation.

While memory may seem less central to *Irma Vep*, I argue that cultural memory fundamentally shapes the film's exploration of cultural translation. The film unfolds with the remaking of Louis Feuillade's silent film serial *Les Vampires* (1915-16). It positions cinema itself as a technology of cultural memory. Through the director René Vidal's (Jean-Pierre Léaud) obsession with faithfully recreating Feuillade's original, the film explores how cultural memory becomes fetishised as a cinephile perspective, creating what Svetlana Boym describes as "restorative nostalgia" – an attempt to rebuild a mythologised past (41). This can also be interpreted as Assayas' own reflection on the film industrial development and the nostalgia for the golden era of French cinema. These ideas parallel Maggie Cheung's presence, as she carries the cultural memory of Hong Kong action cinema embodied in her star persona. Whether by the film crew who works with her in the film or by the viewers of *Irma Vep*, she is regarded as the embodiment of Hong Kong cinema.

2.1 Sensory Memory and Collective Experience: The Jazz Rehearsal in *Memoria*

The jazz rehearsal scene in *Memoria* embodies the film's approach to memory as sensory rather than narrative (01:00:28–01:03:43). For the first half of this sequence, the camera captures only Jessica's face and reactions, keeping the band offscreen. The audience shares

Jessica's perspective and must engage their sensory memory to complete the cinematic space. This deliberate withholding creates what Marks describes as a "haptic" viewing experience, where audiences draw on their own memories to fill perceptual gaps (148). The music remains invisible, as in Chion's concept of "acousmatic sound", to leave the space for the audience to imagine (71). Jessica and other listeners stand motionless to focus on the performance and this is a long scene without any dialogue and minimal camera position changes. When the shot of the quartet finally appears, the sequence has established a form of co-presence beyond language, a shared moment of sensory attention for both Jessica and the audience, demonstrating how music can create collective experiences that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries even beyond the screen (see fig. 3). It highlights music's capacity to communicate across cultural boundaries, creating what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino terms "participatory consciousness", a shared state of attention that connects individuals through sensory experience (16). Jessica and other auditors remain motionless without narrative; a state of collective attentiveness permeates the space and forms an atmosphere. A transpersonal bodily charge that circulates through the room prior and beyond linguistic comprehension, binding disparate bodies into momentary community of feeling through a common act of listening.



Fig. 3.

“Why jazz?” is a central question to understand the transnational as a transcultural art form in this scene. As musicologist Ingrid Monson notes, jazz itself embodies “diasporic aesthetics”, the artistic practices that emerge from cultural displacement and hybridisation (73). Born from the African American experience but incorporating elements from European harmonic traditions, Caribbean rhythms, and various global influences, in the transnational production context of *Memoria*, this already hybrid form accents the film’s transculturation. Although the jazz sequence is not narratively relevant to the film’s story, it demonstrates how sensory experience can create immediate connections across cultural boundaries, offering an alternative model of transnational communication that bypasses linguistic difficulties (akin to Jessica’s struggle to verbally describe her mysterious sound). This scene unites the discussion on cross-cultural communication with the sensory dimensions of displacement.

2.2 Memory as Performative Transformation: The Crystal-Image in *Irma Vep*

In this section, I bring up the hotel prowling sequence of Maggie again with the discussion of self-reflexivity. This scene creates what Deleuze terms a “crystal-image”, a moment where actual and virtual, character and performer, become indistinguishable and reflect on each other (68). The performer, Maggie, and the character, Irma, fold into one another. The complicated film-within-a-film structure also mirrors Assayas’s actual position making a French film influenced by Hong Kong cinema within a transnational production context. As Maggie/Irma crawls across ceilings and steals jewellery, the boundaries between Hong Kong action cinema and French art film dissolve. This sequence functions simultaneously as sensory disruption and as a materialisation of cultural memory in crisis. The degraded video aesthetics suggest the impossibility of faithful translation between cultural forms, while paradoxically creating a space where different cinematic traditions can interact. Unlike conventional representations of cultural memory as narrative flashback, this sequence presents memory as embodied performance that transforms through cultural translation.

What distinguishes this approach to memory from conventional cinematic representations is its emphasis on transformation rather than preservation. The sequence does not simply recall cinema history but actively reimagines it through what performance scholar Joseph Roach defines as “kinesthetic imagination” (26). Maggie’s movements in the

hotel space, her crawling, sliding, and stealing, embody this concept as her physical actions preserve cultural knowledge of both silent film thievery and Hong Kong action choreography through bodily practice. These physical engagements function as a temporal springboard to connect historical periods, cultural traditions, and cinematic forms. According to Thomas Elsaesser, her body becomes a “performative archive”, simultaneously preserving and transforming cultural memory through embodied action (189). Assayas’s deliberate technical transition to degraded video highlights not transparent communication between cultural memories, but rather the productive tensions that emerge to create new cinematic forms precisely through the friction of attempted translation.

3. Transnational Production: Producing the Body

3.1 Transnational Stars

There is a 25-year gap between *Memoria* and *Irma Vep* and their connection is not immediately apparent. But both are further enriched by the transnational star personas of their lead actresses, whose bodies become sites where sensory disorientation is produced at the level of the star itself. As Russell Meeuf states, “A star becomes ‘transnational’ ... because they provide resonant narratives about the challenges of personal and national identity as the world has become more globally interconnected” (197). Tilda Swinton and Maggie Cheung exemplify this concept, functioning as different cultures meet and negotiate within contexts of unequal social power (Meeuf and Raphael 3). Cheung’s position in *Irma Vep* is particularly complex as she plays ‘herself’, a Hong Kong actress working in French cinema both in film and the film-in-a-film; this creates a meta-commentary on transnational stardom itself. Building on the ‘performative archive’ I mentioned above, her body becomes what Sabrina Qiong Yu might recognise as a “transnational star text”, physically embodying the cultural translation central to the film’s themes (142). The restrictive nature of Maggie’s vampire catsuit presents an important element of costume design in *Irma Vep*. Maggie says of the latex costume, “it’s too tight” and her costume designer in the film even comments this looks like a sexual costume (*Irma Vep*, 00:10:17–00:13:43). Maggie’s visible discomfort while wearing it creates a contrast to her natural agility in the opening archive footage the director Vidal watches: Maggie performs martial arts sequences in traditional wuxia attire, moving effortlessly across

rooftops and through complex fight choreography. The vampire costume, with its Western cultural implications of transgression, physically constrains her body that was relatively free in the Hong Kong cinemas. This costume transformation is also a forum of sensory disorientation and makes her move between cinematic cultures. It subtly comments on how Western representations of the vampire mythos often emphasise the monstrous yet seductive otherness of its figures, reimagining and restricting Maggie's physical expression as an Asian actress through this cultural framework.

Tilda Swinton similarly carries her transnational star persona into *Memoria*, where her status as a British actress in Colombia mirrors Jessica's outsider perspective. Her established identity as what Belén Vidal terms an "alternative star" – one who challenges conventional gender norms and crosses between mainstream and art cinema – enhances this portrayal (145). In the film, Jessica is also a character who crosses between cultures, highlighting her liminal position. The scene where Jessica visits an anthropologist (Jeanne Balibar) demonstrates this intercultural negotiation (*Memoria*, 00:40:25–00:42:30). As they examine ancient human remains, their conversation moves fluidly between Spanish and English. The skeletons function as a symbol of human commonality: the ultimate destination for all mankind is death. This creates viewing experiences that disrupt conventional temporality to forge new relationships with historical time. The archaeological motif serves as a metaphor for transnational filmmaking itself—the careful excavation of cultural meanings across temporal and spatial boundaries.

Both actresses represent what Meeuf describes as "performers through which audiences can imagine forms of borderless identity ... capable of managing the tensions between the global and the local, between national identity and cosmopolitan culture" (197). Their established transnational identities allow both films to explore memory not only as a personal phenomenon but as a site where cultural translation acts as negotiation and embodiment.

3.2 Transnational Production as Aesthetic Determinant

The sensory and mnemonic disorientation in these films cannot be separated from their transnational production contexts – the material conditions under which these transnational bodies are cast, funded and distributed. Their transnational production functions as a further

register of sensory disorientation, one that determines how the displaced body appears on screen before any formal strategy is applied. Moving beyond textual analysis, this section examines how these films' production histories shape their aesthetic strategies through Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim's "critical transnationalism" (9). This approach examines how transnational filmmaking practices themselves generate specific forms of cultural negotiation that manifest in both content and form.

Memoria exemplifies this complexity through its unique production history. As Apichatpong's first feature filmed outside Thailand, the project emerges from what Chris Berry describes as "cross-regional filmmaking practices" that challenge traditional national cinema frameworks (127). The collaboration between a Thai director, British actress, Colombian settings and crew, and multinational funding from seven countries creates a truly transnational structure ("Technical Details"). This transnational structure resonates with the film's thematic concerns with cultural translation and displacement. The film's central "Bang—" draws directly on the director's own experience. Apichatpong has described suffering from what he learned was Exploding Head Syndrome, a sound "not from elsewhere but within my head" and the bang sound disappeared while he was making *Memoria* in Bogotá and Pijao (Weerasethakul "To Memoria"). The personal sonic experience carries over into Jessica's search in the film, emerging not only as a thematic choice but as a direct manifestation of what Marks calls "the experience of living between cultures" that characterised its production (24). The films' distribution strategies further reflect their transnational nature.

Memoria's unusual "traveling single-screen release" in the United States by NEON reflects what Toby Miller and colleagues identify as the alternative circulation patterns that characterise certain forms of transnational cinema (43). This approach positions the film against conventional models of global distribution. *Memoria's* unconventional release strategy creates a sense of resistant temporality, the distribution practices that challenge accelerated consumption patterns characteristic of digital platforms. By insisting on theatrical exclusivity and releasing slowly, *Memoria* extends its exploration of alternative temporalities into the distribution itself. This release strategy also extends the film's sensory logic to the viewer's own body: the traveling single-screen release compels audiences to be physically present in a darkened theatre, drawn into the disorienting soundscape with full attention.

The displaced body of Jessica on screen is mirrored by the attentive body in the cinema, encountering the film through sensation.

Irma Vep presents a parallel case through its hybridised production context, emerging at a vital moment when French cinema was re-locating its relationship with global film industries. Assayas's production creates tension between French cinematic tradition and Hong Kong action cinema, reflecting what Mette Hjort terms "affinitive transnationalism", which refers to collaborations motivated by shared aesthetic sensibilities across cultural boundaries (15). The film is produced by Canal+ television and funds with independent film production, which also reflects the industry tensions the film itself critiques. As French cinema faced pressure to compete with Hollywood in the 1990s, Assayas's artistic choices of the contrast between 35mm film and degraded video I mentioned above and the unique film-within-a-film narrative structure of *Irma Vep* is a metaphor of the industrial anxiety about cinema's changing media landscape with the uncertain position of French cinema in global markets, which is a state between artistic tradition and commercial pressure, national specificity and international appeal.

Unlike frameworks that view such productions as simply economic arrangements, I argue that the funding structures in both films are legible in their formal choices. The production record documents Western financing in each case, and I infer a subtler resonance with the films' forms: Jessica's position as a Western expat in Colombia mirrors actual power dynamics in global film production, where Western money often enables non-Western artistic expression while simultaneously shaping it. Similarly, Maggie Cheung's character in *Irma Vep* comments on what film scholar Olivia Khoo identifies as "the fetishization of Asian cinema within European festival circuits" by embodying the complex position of Asian cinema within European art film circles, simultaneously exoticised and celebrated (85).

4. Conclusion: Towards a Sensory Transnationalism

This essay explores how *Memoria* and *Irma Vep* employ innovative sensory strategies, self-reflexive techniques, and transnational production elements to materialise cultural displacement. By developing the concept of 'sensory disorientation', I demonstrate how these films transform the abstract experience of cultural displacement into tangible,

embodied experiences that engage viewers at a sensory level beyond linguistic or narrative representation. Through sensory memory, recollection itself becomes a bodily experience: the body becomes a perceptible carrier of cultural difference, registering and re-experiencing it through sound and texture. The transnational production contexts of these films further portray how industrial and economic structures correspond to the aesthetic forms. Rather than simply representing displacement, these films embody it through their very creation, with funding structures, distribution strategies, and star personae all contributing to their multisensory approaches. Tilda Swinton and Maggie Cheung present the embodiment of cultural negotiation, their performances reflecting broader power dynamics within global cinema networks. In tracing the three registers – perception, memory, and production – this essay relocates the analysis of transnational cinema from what films represent about displacement to how they organise displacement to be sensed, with the disoriented body of both character and viewer as the site where cultural untranslatability is perceived, remembered, and produced.

As global migration continues to reshape cultural landscapes in this century, these films offer valuable insights into how cinema can articulate the embodied experience of displacement beyond narrative representation. By prioritising sensation over exposition, they invite viewers to physically experience the disorientation of cultural translation rather than merely observe it. The ‘sensory disorientation’ strategies in these films ultimately suggest that understanding cultural displacement requires not just intellectual comprehension but bodily engagement and a recognition that transnational experience operates at the level of sense as much as sense-making. Since the advent of sound cinema, films have often relied heavily on dialogue to shape narrative and convey meaning. However, transnational works like *Memoria* and *Irma Vep* remind us that embodied perception can liberate us from this dependence on linguistic communication. Through their emphasis on sensory transnationalism, these films transform the cinema into a contemplative space where cultural translation occurs not through verbal explanation but through bodily engagement; they recover cinema’s capacity to function as a meditative space. In doing so, they transform the limitations of cultural untranslatability into creative possibilities, creating new aesthetic forms with cinematic scope through the productive tensions of attempted translation.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.
- Berry, Chris. "What Is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation". *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, pp. 111–27.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia UP, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam UP, 2005.
- Higbee, Will, and Song Hwee Lim. "Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies". *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 7–21.
- Hjort, Mette. "On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism". *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Natasa Durovicová and Kathleen Newman, Routledge, 2010, pp. 12–33.
- Irma Vep*. Directed by Olivier Assayas, Dacia Films, 1996.
- Khoo, Olivia. *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity*. Hong Kong UP, 2007.
- Les Vampires*. Directed by Louis Feuillade, Gaumont, 1915–1916.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Meeuf, Russell. "Shouldering the Weight of the Global Film Industry: Transnational Stardom and Masculinity in the Career of John Cena". *Transnational Stardom: International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture*, edited by Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 193–212.
- Meeuf, Russell, and Raphael Raphael. "Introduction". *Transnational Stardom: International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture*, edited by Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 1–16.
- Memoria*. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Kick the Machine Films et al., 2021.
- Miller, Toby, et al. *Global Hollywood 2*. British Film Institute, 2005.

- Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Pérez-Osorio, Javier. "From Thailand to Colombia: Soundscapes of a Violent Past in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021)." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 2025, pp. 203-219, <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2930.11>.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge, 2011.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. University of California Press, 2004.
- "Technical Details". *Memoria*, The Match Factory, 2021, memoriathefilm.com. Accessed 12 Aug. 2026.
- "Thai Culture — Naming". *Cultural Atlas*, SBS, culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/thai-culture/thai-culture-naming. Accessed 30 June 2026.
- Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Vidal, Belén. *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic*. Amsterdam UP, 2012.
- Weerasethakul, Apichatpong. "Interview with Andrew Kötting". *Film Comment*, 28 Oct. 2021.
- Weerasethakul, Apichatpong. "To Memoria". *Memoria*, The Match Factory, 2021, memoriathefilm.com. Accessed 12 Aug. 2026.
- Yu, Sabrina Qiong. *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom*. Edinburgh University Press, 2012.