Revista Canaria de

ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Universidad de La Laguna 93 2026



Revista Canaria de

ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Revista Canaria de
ESTUDIOS INGLESES
Universidad de La Laguna

EDITOR IN CHIEF
Juan Ignacio Oliva (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain)

EDITORIAL BOARD
Alonso Almeida, Francisco (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria - Spain), Álvarez Gil, Francisco (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria - Spain), Álvarez López, Esther (Universidad de Oviedo - Spain), Andrés González, Rodrigo (Universitat de Barcelona - Spain), Brossard, Olivier (Université Paris Est-Marne la Vallée - France), Carmona Rodríguez, Pedro Miguel (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Carvalho Homem, Rui (Univerdidade do Porto - Portugal), Chivite de León, María José (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain) Engle, Balz (Universität Basel - Switzerland), García Mayo, María del Pilar (Universidad del País Vasco - Spain) González Rodríguez, María Luz (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Gonzálvez García, Francisco (Universidad de Almería - Spain), Hernández Pérez, María Beatriz (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Hernández-Campoy, Juan Manuel (Universidad de Murcia - Spain), Herrera Cubas, Juana (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Jojo Verge, Violeta (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), León Pérez, Isabel Karely (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Llarena Ascanio, María Jesús (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Łyda, Andrzej (Uniwersytet Śląski - Poland), Mairal Usón, Ricardo (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia - Spain), Martín Arista, Javier (Universidad de La Rioja - Spain), Martín Martín, Pedro Ángel (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Monterrey Rodríguez, José Tomás (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Montesdeoca Cubas, María del Pino (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Naranjo Acosta, Isaías Leopoldo (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Orán Llarena, Fabián (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Pérez Quintero, María Jesús (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain) Plasencia Carballo, Zeus (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, Francisco (Universidad de La Rioja - Spain), Soltysik Monnet, Agnieszka (Université de Lausanne - Switzerland), Thomières, Daniel (Université de Reims - France), Toledano Buendía, María del Carmen (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain), Torres Medina, Dolores (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain).

EDITORIAL SECRETARY
Violetta Jojo Verge (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain)

ADVISORY BOARD
Bernstein, Charles (Emeritus Prof. University of Pennsylvania - US), Davidson, Michael (Emeritus Prof. University of California, San Diego - US), Dietz, Bernd (Universidad de Córdoba - Spain), Galván Reula, Fernando (Universidad de Alcalá - Spain), Humm, Maggie (Emeritus Prof. University of East London - UK), Jeremy Smith (Emeritus Prof. University of Glasgow - UK), Liceras, Juana M. (Distinguished Prof. University of Ottawa - Canada), Mackenzie, J. Lachlan (Emeritus Prof. VU Amsterdam - Netherlands), Rockland, Michael A.(Emeritus Prof. Rutgers University - US), Salager-Meyer, Françoise (Universidad de Los Andes, Venezuela), Teun A. Van Dijk (Centre of Discourse Studies Barcelona - Spain).

TECHNICAL EDITOR
Alejandro López de Vergara (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
Domínguez Caballero de Rodas, Pedro José (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain),
Sánchez Hernández, María Elena (Universidad de La Laguna - Spain).

PUBLISHER
Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de La Laguna
Campus Central. 38200 La Laguna.
Santa Cruz de Tenerife.
E-mail: servicio.publicaciones@ull.edu.es

DESIGN
J.H. Vera/Javier Torres/Luis C. Espinosa

TYPESET BY
Servicio de Publicaciones

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93
ISSN: 0211-5913 (edición impresa) / ISSN: e-2530-8335 (edición digital)
Depósito Legal: TF 275/81

Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

Revista Canaria de
ESTUDIOS INGLESES
93

Servicio de Publicaciones
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA, 2026

REVISTA canaria de estudios ingleses. –N.º 1 (1980)–. –La Laguna: Universidad, Servicio de Publicaciones, 1980–
Semestral
ISSN: 0211-5913 (edición impresa) / ISSN: e-2530-8335 (edición digital)
1. Literatura inglesa-Publicaciones periódicas 2. Lengua inglesa-Gramática-Publicaciones periódicas I. Universidad de La Laguna. Servicio de Publicaciones, ed.
820(05)
802.0-5(05)

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

RCEI invites contributions of articles in such fields as linguistics, literature, critical theory, history, and cultural studies within English Studies. Manuscript submissions, presented in English between 6000 and 8000 words, should conform to the guidelines found in the latest *Chicago Style Manual*. For specific instructions on style contact the editorial office. Authors are expected to send their contributions as an attachment to rceing@ull.edu.es. Short abstracts (about 6-8 lines) in English and Spanish are required, along with the keywords/Palabras Clave (4-8) of the essay in both languages. The Editorial Committee reserves the right to introduce stylistic changes and to adjust illustrations.

Further details on submissions: https://www.ull.es/servicios/publicaciones/publicacion/revista-canaria-de-estudios-ingleses/.

Any acknowledgments must appear as an initial, unnumbered note. Footnotes, numbered consecutively throughout the manuscript, must be, in the case of quoted material, after the punctuation mark (indented quotes) or the quotation marks. Digressive or excessively lengthy footnotes should be avoided. Subsequent references to a previously cited work require only the author's last name but in the case of previous citations to more than one work by the same author, a title must appear (as is clear, *op. cit*. is not to be used).

Each contributor should send a note stating specifically his/her manuscript is only being considered for publication by *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*. Authors may republish their own material, provided such republication states due acknowledgment. Published twice yearly, in April and November.

Editorial correspondence and all copies of books to be considered for reviews should be addressed to the Editor, *RCEI*, Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de La Laguna, Campus de Guajara, 38200 La Laguna, Tenerife, Islas Canarias, España. Decisions on articles submitted are normally made within three months and those accepted published within a year. As is traditional academic practice, *RCEI* only publishes (blind) peer-reviewed essays.

The *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* is scanned, indexed, abstracted or ranked by the following:ABELL (Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature), Agence Bibliographique de l'Enseignement Supérieur, AustLit (The Resource for Australian Literature), BD-ISOC, British Humanities Index, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA), CARHUS, CINDOC, CIRC (Clasificación Integrada de Revistas Científicas), Dialnet, DICE, DULCINEA, ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia), ERIH (European Reference Index for the Humanities), Google Scholar Metrics, Humbul Humanities Hub, IBR (International Bibliography of Book Reviews of Scholarly Literature on the Humanities and Social Sciences), IBZ (International Bibliography of Periodical Literature on the Humanities and Social Sciences), IN-RECH, JournalBase, Latindex, Linguistics Abstracts On-Line, LLBA (Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts), MIAR, MLA Directory of Periodicals, MLA International Bibliography, Periodicals Contents Index, RESH, SCImago Journal Rank, RI (Regesta Imperii), Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory, WorldCat, The Year's Work in English Studies, and Zeitschriftendatenbank.

© Copyright, 2022 RCEI. Universidad de La Laguna.

For further details concerning journal exchange, back issues, etc., please contact:

Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses
Servicio de Publicaciones
Universidad de La Laguna
Campus Central
38200 La Laguna (Tenerife, España)
E-mail: servicio.publicaciones@ull.edu.es

CONTENTS

SPECIAL ISSUE

Decolonising Affective Relationships in Contemporary Romantic Narratives / Descolonizar las relaciones afectivas en las narrativas románticas contemporáneas

Introduction: Decolonising Affective Relationships in Contemporary Romantic Narratives: Mapping the Critical Grounds / Descolonizar las relaciones afectivas en las narrativas románticas contemporáneas: una cartografía crítica
Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez & *Irene Pérez-Fernández*, guest editors 9

ARTICLES

Reparative Romance and the Echoes of Classic Love Stories in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* Series by Sarah J. Maas / Narrativa romántica reparadora y ecos de historias de amor clásicas en la saga *A Court of Thorns and Roses* de Sarah J. Maas
Nóra Máthé 21

Probing a Culturally Unequal Relationship: The Unexpected Transformative Effects of Unromantic Love in J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole* / Una relación marcada por la desigualdad a examen: los efectos inesperadamente transformadores del amor no romántico en *The Pole* de J.M. Coetzee
Marie Herbillon 35

Love, Food and Sovereignty: Indigenous Romance and Relationality in Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* / Amor, comida y soberanía: ficción romántica indígena y relacionalidad en *Native Love Jams* de Tashia Hart
Silvia Martínez-Falquina 59

Creating Places: *Paseos*, *Vaivén* and *Compadrazgo* in Latinx Romance / Crear lugares: paseos, vaivén y compadrazgo en la ficción romántica Latinx
Nattie Golubov 77

Un/Happy Narratives: Re-Orienting the Romantic Imperative in Rebecca K Reilly's *Greta & Valdin* / Narrativas in/felices: La reorientación del imperativo romántico en *Greta & Valdin* de Rebecca K Reilly.
Paloma Fresno-Calleja 99

Levelling Up Asian-Australian Romance: Intersectional Representation in Leanne Yong's *Two Can Play That Game* / Potenciar la ficción romántica asiático-australiana: representación interseccional en *Two Can Play That Game* de Leanne Yong
Astrid Schwegler-Castañer 117

Reconciling Love and Heritage through Cultural Polyamory in Jane Igharo's *Ties That Tether* / La reconcialiación del amor y la herencia cultural a través del poliamor cultural en *Ties That Tether* de Jane Igharo
Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar 137

Uncoupling Love: Rethinking Romantic Norms in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* / Desemparejar el amor: repensar las normas románticas en *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*
Inés Hernández-Martínez 155

MISCELLANY

Longevity And Temporality In Three Postcolonial Speculative Narratives / Longevidad y temporalidad en tres narrativas especulativas postcoloniales
Maricel Oró Piqueras, *Sarah Falcus* & *Katsura Sako* 173

(Re)Mapping Gendered Geographies In Native Women's Non-Fiction: The Poetics Of Vulnerability In Terese Marie Mailhot's Memoir / (Re) configuración de geografías de género en la no-ficción de mujeres nativas: las poéticas de la vulnerabilidad en las memorias de Terese Marie Mailhot
Rosa Segarra Montero 191

INTERVIEW

Migration, Memory, Identity: An Overview and Interview of Sherry Thomas's Writing / Migración, memoria, identidad: una panorámica y entrevista a Sherry Thomas.
Jayashree Kamblé 221

CREATION

"A Thousand Times Away"/ "Mil veces lejos"
Eugenia Ossana 243

REVIEW

Cultures, Narratives, and Concepts edited by Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Marcin Trojszczak
Lucía Brandáriz Puente 249

SPECIAL ISSUE

Decolonising Affective Relationships in Contemporary Romantic Narratives /
Descolonizar las relaciones afectivas en las narrativas románticas contemporáneas

DECOLONISING AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC NARRATIVES: MAPPING THE CRITICAL GROUNDS*

Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez
University of the Balearic Islands

Irene Pérez-Fernández
University of Oviedo

DESCOLONIZAR LAS RELACIONES AFECTIVAS EN LAS NARRATIVAS ROMÁNTICAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS: UNA CARTOGRAFÍA CRÍTICA

> Love is the prism through which I view the world. I truly believe it binds and propels us. This isn't a naive denial of the darkness that we know exists in the world, rather it is a refusal to allow the devastation, the horror or the heartache to consume us. It is affirming the knowledge that there is light. Love is that light. Romance sweetens the casual bitterness we can encounter; it heightens the mundane and makes the terrestrial supernatural. (Babalola 2020, ix)

> I portray love and desire between a variety of characters in my writing –people who look like me, and whose world view is similar to my own, or in some cases not. However –and this should be obvious, but– human beings *of all kinds* fall in love, and have desire, and heartache, and heartbreak. It's vital that we get to see one another in this sometimes fire-hot, sometimes soul-warming, sometimes icily-devastating light. It is vital that we see *ourselves* portrayed in this way. Seeing love of all kinds represented fully, in art as in life, allows us to relate on a level that can be dangerous when lacking. (Domingo 2022, 2-3; italics in original)

Few literary genres have attracted such sustained popular attention as romantic fiction. Romance is one of the most widely published, read and culturally influential literary genres (Allan 2020; Larson 2024; Markert 2017; Tapper 2014) with an established and vibrant scholarship, which in the last decade has witnessed an enriching surge of academic research (Burge 2016; Burge & McAlister 2026; Gleason & Selinger 2016; Kamblé, Selinger, & Teo 2021; Missler 2017; Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Teo & Fresno Calleja 2024). This third wave of scholarship, marked by interdisciplinary expansion, explores the genre's complexity and significance for readers and has decisively transcended outdated critical assumptions that dismissed

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.00
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 9-17; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

romance as formulaic, merely escapist or politically conservative and associated it with emotional excess, commercial culture, and narratives of personal fulfilment seemingly detached from broader social realities (Anderson 1974; Pearce 1995; Radway 1984; Regis 2003; Snitow 1979). Despite this increasing scholarly attention, romance continues to attract a degree of scepticism in certain academic circles rarely directed to other expressions of popular culture, a tendency that might explain the scarcity of research on the intersections of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies with romance in particular, or genre fiction in general (Munos & Ledent 2018).

Questions of identity, kinship, migration, memory, belonging, cultural conflict, race, and social justice have long occupied a central place within Postcolonial and Decolonial scholarship (Jazeel 2019; Lugones 2020; Mignolo 2011; McLeod 2000; Young 2016) and are intrinsically intertwined with issues concerning love, intimacy, and desire, which, in turn, are not detached from the historical and cultural contexts in which they emerge (Berlant 2000; Illouz 2012; Jónasdóttir 2018). Indeed, colonial discourses and histories influence perceptions of race, gender, and desirability; migration transforms family structures and affective bonds; and cultural traditions shape expectations surrounding intimacy, marriage, kinship, and community. Thus, a genre such as romance, whose main interests are affective attachments, offers a productive perspective from which to examine how colonial legacies continue to influence understanding of desire, identity and love. Despite this, too often, the romance genre has been regarded as excessively commercial, predictable, or closely associated with private fulfilment and happiness to contribute meaningfully to wider discussions of resistance, colonialism and its legacies, or personal and social transformation (Kamblé, Selinger, & Teo 2021; Roach 2016).

Certainly, as the third wave of romantic criticism has demonstrated,[1] contemporary popular romantic narratives are increasingly challenging established generic conventions while also unsettling and reconfiguring traditional cultural understanding of love, intimacy and desire. Driven by the genre's commercial success and by a growing demand for more diverse perspectives, writers from postcolonial, diasporic, indigenous and minoritized communities have adopted romance in its wide range of subgenres and formats, adapting and transforming its conventions to celebrate diversity in love, accommodate their own experiences and to promote distinct political and cultural agendas (Pryde 2022; Teo 2021). Romantic narratives such as Bolu Babalola's *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World, Retold*

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

[1] The third wave of popular romance scholarship refers to the most recent post-millennial scholarly work examining the genre. See, for example, Burge 2016; Burge & McAlister 2026; Gleason & Selinger 2016; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Missler 2017; Pérez-Fernández & Pérez Ríu, 2021; Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Teo & Fresno Calleja 2024. This wave moves beyond earlier debates and approaches the genre as a complex cultural product, engaging with intersectional perspectives to explore postmillennial transformations in publishing, authorship, and readership.

(2020), Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last* (2018), Alexis Daria's *You Had Me at Hola* (2020), Kelechi Okafor's *Edge of Here* (2021), Jane Igharo's *The Sweetest Remedy* (2021) or Sareeta Domingo's edited collection of short stories *Who's Loving You* (2021), to name but a few, increasingly engage with issues that have long occupied postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, thus inviting us to reconsider the association between the genre of romance and Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies. These narratives bear witness to histories marked by exclusion and inequality, experiences of migration and displacement, tensions between cultural traditions and contemporary identities, and examine the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality shape intimate experiences. At the same time, these romantic narratives retain one of the genre's defining features: an investment in hope and the possibility of positive transformation (Kamblé 2023; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Roach 2016). As the opening quotations of this introduction by Black British romance authors Bolu Babalola and Sareeta Domingo suggest, love is a powerful force in the face of adversity which affirms humanity and enables meaningful connection across differences; love is indeed a fundamental decolonial practice of recognition and belonging. The combination of social critique and affective optimism makes contemporary romance particularly relevant in discussions about how minoritized subjects and communities negotiate the ever-increasing challenges of modern life. This special issue seeks to contribute to the discussion on how present-day romantic narratives constitute a privileged site for examining how colonial histories and legacies still shape intimacy, kinship, belonging and affect while simultaneously imagining decolonial alternative futures.

To decolonise affective relationships involves more than expanding representations or diversifying romantic narratives. It entails interrogating the conditions that have produced and sustained the norms that legitimise certain forms of intimacy while others have been marginalised, rendered invisible, or excluded. The growing attention devoted to affective relationships within scholarship has also generated renewed interest in the connection between romance and happiness. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed examines how happiness becomes attached to particular objects, aspirations, and ways of living. Ahmed highlights the normative dimensions of happiness, specifically observing that "one of the primary happiness indicators is marriage" (6). This statement is very significant within the context of romance, a genre traditionally associated with courtship, couple formation, and emotional fulfilment. As Ahmed suggests, marriage frequently emerges as a privileged marker of happiness and social success (6), an assumption which has played a key role in shaping both cultural understandings of intimacy and the narrative conventions traditionally associated with romance. Ahmed's notion of happiness provides a framework for examining why certain aspects and representations of intimacy acquire cultural legitimacy while others remain marginalised. As she argues, certain objects become "happiness means" and "happiness pointers" (26), directing individuals towards specific futures. In this way, happiness becomes closely tied to social expectations concerning emotions, marriage, family, coupledom, relationality and belonging. To question these expectations therefore involves questioning how successful lives are imagined and evaluated.

Beyond this normative understanding of happiness, relationality and interdependence have also occupied a central position within care ethics in which love and our capacity to respond to others become centripetal humanising forces (hooks 2003, 103) that not only validate one's existence but also acknowledge its positioning in relation to that of other beings and to the environment, recognising our inherent interdependencies. Scholarship on care has challenged understandings of the self as an autonomous and sufficient subject, highlighting instead the extent to which human life depends upon networks of care, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility (Held 2006; Gilligan 2011; Tronto 1993). Carol Gilligan argues that modern societies are becoming increasingly aware of "the reality of interdependence and the costs of isolation," recognising that "autonomy is an illusion –that people's lives are interconnected" (2011, 17). Similarly, Virginia Held sustains that "the ethics of care usually works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories" (2006, 13). These notions challenge understandings of intimacy and happiness grounded exclusively in personal fulfilment. Instead, they foreground the relational dimensions of human existence, for affective bonds reveal the networks of dependency and responsibility that connect private lives to the communities of which they are part. Held underlines the importance of "attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations" (15), qualities which emphasize to what extent social life depends upon relationships of reciprocity and mutual support. Against this background, the notion of "promiscuous care" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 35) proves fruitful for decolonizing affective connections. Rejecting restrictive and hierarchical understandings of obligation and kinship, the authors argue that "anyone can potentially care for, about and with anyone" (35), suggesting that "all forms of care between all categories of human and non-human should be valued, recognised and resourced equally" (35). In this respect, care theory is essential to examine contemporary romantic narratives and their articulation of relationality and alternative forms of kinship, community and belonging.

Along these lines, recent scholarship on love and intimacy has increasingly challenged the tendency to understand romantic relationships as purely private experiences detached from institutional power. Instead, scholars have highlighted the extent to which love is shaped by cultural values, social expectations, and systems of power. Maija Lanas and Michalinos Zembylas conceptualise "love as an emotion, love as choice, love as response, love as relational, love as political, and love as praxis" (2014, 3). This association between love and community echoes Janine Joyce's observation that, within the context of Peace Studies, love is predominantly articulated "through the activities of peace education and through the embodiment of individuals committed to a series of practices and activities aimed at creating change" (2023, 18), thus placing an emphasis on agency and community. This understanding of love as a social and relational force is not entirely new. As Erich Fromm (1957) famously argues, the desire for interpersonal union constitutes "the most fundamental passion" because it is the force that keeps together "the human race, the clan, the family, society" (qtd Grobbelaar, Boyd, & Dudek 2023, 6). Fromm's observation underlines the extent to which love exceeds personal experience. Similarly,

bell hooks conceives love not as a mere emotion but as an ethical and relational practice. hooks defines love through a combination of "affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (2001, 5). Such an understanding moves beyond idealised or purely emotional conceptions of intimacy. Instead, it emphasises the relational practices through which connections between human beings are established and maintained. Hence, instead of merely representing personal connection, a narrative genre such as romance, whose primary focus is love, may be understood as a space through which pressing concerns around (self)care, recognition, responsibility, and belonging are depicted and negotiated.

The contributions in this special issue precisely engage with contemporary debates on, love, happiness and care from a variety of literary, cultural and theoretical perspectives. The articles included here differ in terms of genre, and cultural context. Yet, they share an interest in how romantic narratives respond to key debates about history, identity, representation, belonging, and social justice. This special issue is organized around a set of interconnected analytical concerns that reflect both the thematic diversity of the corpus examined and the range of critical questions through which contemporary romance is explored. Three interconnected themes structure this volume: revising and reimagining romantic traditions, the personal and communal dimension of love, and finally alternative intimacies and new relational futures in contemporary romance. The first group of essays address the relationship between contemporary romance and inherited traditions, engaging with established romantic conventions while exploring their limitations, revising their assumptions, or adapting them to new social and cultural contexts. Nóra Máthé's analysis of Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series (2015-2021) explores how recent fantasy romance revisits narrative traditions associated with Jane Austen, the Brontës, and gothic romance. Her discussion examines how these familiar structures are adapted to address trauma, agency, healing, and emotional recovery, demonstrating how inherited romantic forms continue to be reshaped in response to contemporary concerns, transforming into narratives in which affective justice and personal healing occupy a central place. Marie Herbillon's discussion of J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole* (2023), focuses on the novella's engagement with European Romanticism, intercultural encounters, and unequal cultural relationships. Marie Herbillon's analysis of intercultural negotiations through the lens of love reveals how ideals of romance emerge from particular cultural histories and how they become unsettled when confronted with alternative cultural contexts.

A second group of articles explores the connections between intimacy and belonging, with several contributions moving beyond individualized understandings of romance and affective relations to examine how love intersects with community, family, cultural identity and collective memory. Silvia Martínez-Falquina's analysis of Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* (2023) shifts attention to indigenous understandings of relationality grounded in reciprocity, community, and connection to the natural world. As Martínez-Falquina demonstrates, *Native Love Jams* offers a vision of intimacy rooted in collective wellbeing, where personal relationships remain inseparable from larger questions of community and cultural continuity. Similar concerns of belonging and collective identity are present in Nattie Golubov's

discussion of contemporary Latinx romance fiction in her examination of Alana Quintana Albertson's Love & Tacos series, Natalie Caña's Vega Family series, and the Milagro Street series by Angelina M. Lopez. The narratives examined in Nattie Golubov's contribution are shaped by experiences of displacement, gentrification, and cultural erasure, situating romantic attachments within ongoing struggles over space, memory, and community survival.

Although belonging continues to be a central concern in the subsequent articles in this second theme the focus gradually shifts from community to the more intimate negotiations through which individuals make sense of identity, desire, and selfhood. Paloma Fresno-Calleja's reading of Rebecca K Reilly's *Greta & Valdin* (2021) examines the experiences of queer, Māori, and diasporic characters as they navigate family bonds, romantic attachments, and competing understandings of happiness. Instead of presenting happiness as a clearly defined goal, Fresno-Calleja argues that *Greta & Valdin* portrays it as an ongoing process shaped by uncertainty, vulnerability, and the negotiation of multiple belongings. Recognition and representation also occupy a central place in Astrid Schwegler-Castañer's discussion of Leanne Yong's *Two Can Play That Game* (2023). This contribution examines Yong's focus on a Malaysian-Australian demisexual protagonist and the intersection of cultural identity, sexuality, and romantic experience in the novel, demonstrating how representation itself emerges as an important aspect of a sense of belonging.

The third thematic strand of the special issue explores alternative affective unions and futures, focusing on narratives that envision different relational possibilities. Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar's discussion of Jane Igharo's *Ties That Tether* (2020) introduces the notion of "cultural polyamory" as a lens through which to understand diasporic identity. The analysis explores the ways humans navigate multiple cultural affiliations without reducing them to mutually exclusive choices. The contribution demonstrates that romantic relationships become spaces through which these negotiations take place, allowing the protagonist to reconcile different attachments without subordinating one to the other. This emphasis on multiplicity also informs Inés Hernández-Martínez's discussion of *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017). Hernández-Martínez examines how the film challenges hegemonic assumptions about intimacy, family, and romantic legitimacy through its portrayal of polyamorous relationships as consensual non-monogamy. Examining the communication, negotiation, and mutual care that sustain their intimacy, this piece studies how *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* complicates conventional understandings of commitment and emotional fulfilment.

Many of the concerns that are central throughout the scholarly essays are discussed in Jayashree Kamblé's interview with bestselling romance author Sherry Thomas. The inclusion of this interview reflects this special issue's commitment to bringing scholars' and authors' approaches into dialogue while also broadening the perspectives represented within the volume. As a Chinese American writer whose work has contributed significantly to enlarge the cultural and historical horizons of contemporary romance, Thomas reflects on migration, identity, memory, representation, and the publishing industry. Her observations provide valuable insight into the experiences of a writer working within a genre that has traditionally

been shaped by white-centered assumptions (Beckett 2019; Young, 2020) while also illustrating the ways authors from historically underrepresented backgrounds continue to transform the field. The volume closes with Eugenia Ossana's short story "A Thousand Times Away," a creative contribution that articulates many of the themes explored throughout the preceding essays. Through its engagement with class difference, racial prejudice, memory, desire, motherhood, and social mobility, the story examines the relationship between private choices and the wider social structures within which they are made. Including a creative work alongside scholarly and authorial contributions highlights the special issue's belief that storytelling itself is a meaningful site of knowledge production and a valuable space for exploring the affective, social, and political concerns that run throughout the volume.

Taken together, the essays, the interview, and the short story included in this special issue demonstrate that romance is far more deeply intertwined with history, identity, migration, community, and social change than long-standing misconceptions about the genre suggest. The texts discussed here reveal the extent to which affective ties are shaped by larger cultural and political forces, while also highlighting the role romance can play in negotiating experiences of belonging, exclusion, and transformation. Together, the contributions explore how romantic narratives imagine forms of attachment that challenge dominant assumptions about happiness, marriage and personal fulfilment. By bringing together scholarly, authorial, and creative voices, this volume seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations in the academically robust field of romance, whose literary and academic significance within literary and cultural studies is well established, and to foreground its relevance to broader discussions of representation, identity, and social justice within the fields of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP.

Allan, Jonathan A. 2020. *Men, Masculinities and Popular Romance*. Routledge.

Anderson, Rachel. 1974. *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Subliterature of Love*. Hodder Stoughton.

Babalola, Bolu. 2020. *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World, Retold*. Headline.

Beckett, Lois. 2019. "Fifty Shades of White: The Long Fight Against Racism in Romance Novels." *The Guardian* (April 4). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/04/fifty-shades-of-white-romance-novels-racism-ritas-rwa.

Berlant, Lauren. ed. 2000. *Intimacy*. The U of Chicago P.

Burge, Amy. 2016. *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance*. Palgrave.

Burge, Amy, & Jodi McAlister. 2026. *The Bonkbuster: Women's Popular Reading in the Long 1980s*. Bloomsbury.

Chatzidakis, Andreas, Hakim, Jamie, Littler, Jo, Rottenberg, Catherine & Lynne Segal. 2020. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Independence*. The Care Collective. Verso.

Domingo Sareeta, ed. 2021. *Who's Loving You: Love Stories by Women of Colour*. Trapeze.

Gilligan, Carol. 2011. *Joining the Resistance.* Polite P.

Gleason, William A., & Eric Murphy Selinger, eds. 2016. *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* Routledge.

Grobbelaar, Madalena, Reid Boyd, Elisabeth, & Debra Dudek. 2023. "About this Book –or our Love story: Finding Love in the Arts and Humanities." In *Contemporary Love Studies in Arts and Humanities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global.* Oxford U P.

hooks, bell. 2001. *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow.

hooks, bell. 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge.

Illouz, Eva. 2012. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Polity.

Jazeel, Tariq. 2019. *Postcolonialism*. Routledge.

Jónasdóttir, Anna G. 2013. "Love Studies: A (Re)new(ed) Field of Knowledge Interests." In *Love: A Question for Feminism in the 21st century*, ed. Ann Ferguson & Anna G. Jónasdóttir. 11-29. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Murphy Selinger, Eric & Hsu-Ming Teo, eds. 2021. *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2023. *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*. Indiana UP.

Lanas, Maija, & Michalinos Zembylas. 2014. "Towards a Transformational Political Concept of Love in Critical Education." *Stud Philos Educ*. Pub. Online. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-014-9424-5.

Larson, Christine. 2024. *Love in the Time of Self-Publishing: How Romance Writers Changed the Rules of Writing and Success*. Princeton UP.

Lugones, María. 2020. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25(4): 742-759.

Markert, John. 2016. *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry*. McFarland & Co.

McLeod, John. 2000. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester UP.

Mignolo, Walter D. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP.

Missler, Heike. 2017. *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation*. Routledge.

Munos, Delphine, & Bénédicte Ledent. 2018. "'Minor' Genres in Postcolonial Literatures: New Webs of Meaning." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54(1): 1-5.

Pearce, Lynee and Jackie Stacey. eds. 1995. *Romance Revisited*. New York UP.

Pérez-Fernández, Irene & Carmen Pérez Ríu, eds. 2021. *Romantic Escapes: Post-Millennial Trends in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction*. Peter Lang.

Pryde, Jessica P., ed. 2022. *Black Love Matters. Real Talk on Romance, Being Seen, and Happily Ever Afters*. Penguin.

Radway, Janice. 1991. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. The U of North Carolina P.

Regis, Pamela. 2003. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. U of Pennsylvania P.

Roach, Catherine. 2016. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana UP.

Snitow, Ann Barr. 1979. "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different." *Radical History Review* 20: 141-161. https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1979-20-141.

Tapper, Olivia. 2014. "Romance and Innovation in Twenty-First Century Publishing. *Pub Res Q* 30: 249-259.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2018. "The Contemporary Anglophone Genre." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2021. "Love and Romance Novels." In *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Teo, Hsu-Ming, and Paloma Fresno Calleja. Eds. 2024. *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History*. Routledge.

Tronto, Joan C. 1993. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge.

Young, Erin. S. 2021. "Race, Ethnicity and Whiteness." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 511-528. Routledge.

Young, Robert J.C. 2016. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell.

ARTICLES

REPARATIVE ROMANCE AND THE ECHOES OF CLASSIC LOVE STORIES IN THE *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES* SERIES BY SARAH J. MAAS

Nóra Máthé
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

Abstract

The fantasy romance series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*ACOTAR*) has garnered a vast readership and become a recent phenomenon. I explore how *ACOTAR* constructs its romance narratives as sites of healing and reparation investigating how Maas employs romantic tropes reminiscent of Austen and the Brontës to construct a fantasy world where love serves as a personal and political act of reparation. In doing so, *ACOTAR* revises and modernizes classic narrative structures, reinforcing the genre's ability to engage with contemporary concerns about power, agency, and affective justice. I also situate *ACOTAR* within the broader discourse of postcolonial and feminist literary critique, questioning how its reparative romance model aligns with or diverges from critical perspectives on hegemonic narratives of love. While Maas reproduces some of the typical female fantasies about men, she also reconfigures these romantic ideals for contemporary readers. Ultimately, I argue that *ACOTAR*'s popularity is not merely the result of genre escapism but a reflection of how romance fiction continues to evolve as a space for reimagining love, power, and healing.

Keywords: Sarah J. Maas, *ACOTAR*, Romantasy, Romantic Fantasy, Gothic Romance.

NARRATIVA ROMÁNTICA REPARADORA Y ECOS DE HISTORIAS DE AMOR CLÁSICAS EN LA SAGA *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES* DE SARAH J. MAAS

resumen

A Court of Thorns and Roses (*ACOTAR*) se ha convertido en un fenómeno reciente. Exploro cómo *ACOTAR* construye narrativas románticas como espacios de sanación y reparación y analizo cómo Maas emplea tropos románticos que recuerdan a Austen y a las hermanas Brontë para construir un mundo de fantasía en el que el amor funciona como un acto personal y político de reparación. La saga revisa y moderniza estructuras narrativas clásicas, mostrando la capacidad del género para abordar preocupaciones contemporáneas sobre poder, agencia y justicia afectiva. Sitúo *ACOTAR* dentro de la crítica literaria feminista y poscolonial, evaluando hasta qué punto reproduce o cuestiona narrativas hegemónicas del amor. Aunque Maas mantiene ciertas fantasías femeninas, también reconfigura estos ideales románticos para el público lector contemporáneo. Sostengo que la popularidad de *ACOTAR* no responde solo al escapismo del género, sino a la evolución de la ficción romántica como espacio para reimaginar el amor, el poder y la sanación.

Palabras clave: Sarah J. Maas, *ACOTAR*, romantasía, fantasía romántica, romance gótico.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.01
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 21-34; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Romance fiction has long occupied an ambivalent position within both popular culture and literary criticism. Although it is one of the most dominant genres in the global publishing markets with a wide range of niches and a strong presence online both through self-publishing and digital publishing (Markert 2021), it continues to be dismissed as formulaic, escapist, and sometimes even as apolitical (Radway 1984, Gill 2007). Such critiques obscure the genre's ongoing evolution, particularly within the twenty-first century, where popular romance has become a prevalent site for exploring questions of identity, trauma, agency, and affect. As scholars of the so-called third wave of romance studies (Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Pérez-Fernández & Pérez Ríu 2021) have argued, contemporary romance is deeply entangled with political and cultural concerns. It revises challenging hegemonic narratives about love, desire, and gender, often in a setting that politicizes femininity (Kamblé 2023).

The recent commercial and cultural success of the fantasy romance subgenre exemplifies this shift, especially with the rise of online social reading communities, such as BookTok or Bookstagram (Niebling 2025), where books are not only advertised and recommended, but also analyzed. In these circles, the romantasy genre is exceedingly popular (Balling and Martens 2024), with titles that have become global phenomena, such as Rebecca Yarros' *The Empyrean* series or Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Even though these book series are read by millions of people worldwide, the genre is still marginalized. As Niebling notes, "[r]omantasy, like romance, is still conceptualized in literary criticism through stereotypical apolitical understandings of 'light fiction or trivial literature'" (2).

Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* has emerged as one of the most popular series (Grady 2024). The series consists of four novels and a collection of short stories so far. In this article, I will focus on the first three novels, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*ACOTAR*), *A Court of Mist and Fury* (*ACOMAF*), and *A Court of Wings and Ruin* (*ACOWAR*), because they encompass the central story of the main character, Feyre Archeron. Although these books, like most of the romantasy genre, are often disregarded as trivial, the series engages directly with themes central to feminist and postcolonial inquiry, including the lingering effects of trauma, the dynamics of abusive relationships, and the pursuit of autonomy and affective justice. *ACOTAR* depicts a world in which love, be it romantic, communal, or familial, functions as a reparative force capable of confronting past wounds and envisioning transformative futures.

Furthermore, Maas engages with classical romance traditions shaped by authors such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. Feyre Archeron's journey, from the oppressive, patriarchal dynamic with her first lover, Tamlin, to the egalitarian and restorative partnership with Rhysand, echoes canonical narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. This article positions *ACOTAR* as not only a form of escapist fiction, but also as a reparative narrative that resonates with contemporary readers' experiences of trauma, desire, and social precarity. By blending fantasy world-building with classical romantic structures, the series reimagines familiar

tropes (e.g., the transformative relationship, the heroine's ascension into power, etc.) while interrogating their emotional and political implications. In doing so, Maas both inherits and revises the romance tradition, offering a narrative that speaks to ongoing cultural concerns about love, healing, and agency in a fractured world.

Drawing upon romance studies, feminist theory, trauma studies, and classical romance traditions, this paper focuses on the reparative reading of the romantasy series, *ACOTAR*. I introduce Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading, which offers an alternative to what Ricoeur (1970) describes as the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur names Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx the "masters of suspicion" (1970, 33), noting that they treat texts with suspicion and read them with the goal of identifying secrets, demystifying, and uncovering hidden agendas that are not immediately obvious to the reader. He contrasts this attitude with the hermeneutics of faith, because faith is "the contrary of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1970, 28). Faith is placed into the text's intended meaning, which reveals itself to the reader. Felski (2011, 216) claims that suspicion is "a mode of interpretation that adopts a distrustful attitude toward texts in order to draw out meanings or implications that are not intended and that remain inaccessible to their authors as well as to ordinary readers." This attitude of interpretation is especially prevalent in literary criticism because the critics may refuse "obligations of reverence and fidelity" and "assert their right to fashion something new out of the words on the page, to reframe them in the light of their own concerns and commitments" (Felski 2011, 228-29).

Sedgwick's (1997) theory of paranoid reading and reparative reading draws upon Ricoeur's theory. Paranoid reading aligns with the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it dominates literary analysis because it defines itself by the principle of "no bad surprises" (Sedgwick 1997, 9), so the critic always engages with the text from a suspicious standpoint. Sedgwick notes that "[t]he unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward" (1997, 10), and the critic does not want to be surprised. Instead, they seek to expose, diagnose, or dismantle the ideological structures within the text. In contrast, reparative reading offers an alternative to the critical habits of suspicion, approaching the text with an openness to its affective and imaginative possibilities. Sedgwick argues that reparative readers assemble from the text resources that nourish, comfort, or reorient, instead of simply confirming systemic harm. This is an inherently hopeful stance. Sedgwick claims that hope, "often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters" (1997, 24). This reading does not deny the realities of trauma, patriarchy, or oppression. Rather, it accounts for how readers might locate the emotional materials for survival, pleasure, or healing within a text. Reparative reading is particularly useful for genres such as romantasy, which offer narrative models of care, reciprocity, and restoration that resonate deeply with readers. Applying a reparative framework to *ACOTAR* allows us to understand its romantic and fantastical elements not merely as escapist wish-fulfillment, but as part of a broader cultural effort to imagine intimacy, agency, and emotional healing within the genre. In the

upcoming sections, I will introduce the key elements of the theoretical framework of this paper, followed by an analysis of the series.

2. TRAUMA, HEALING, AND REPARATIVE NARRATIVES IN POPULAR ROMANCE

Scholarly engagement with popular romance can be traced back to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), which used reader-response criticism to understand women's motivation for reading romance novels, as well as the genre's entanglement with patriarchal structures. Radway frames romance as both compensatory and socially conservative in 1984, but later scholars identify more variations and diversity. Pamela Regis (2003) notices that even critics of the genre are not well-versed in the romance novel's characteristics and often only focus on the love story itself and ignore the other aspects of the narrative. She claims that the romance novel is "about women's freedom. The genre is popular because it conveys the pain, uplift, and joy that freedom brings" (Regis 2003, xiii). More recent scholarship, often referred to as the third wave of romance studies, positions romance as a politically engaged and culturally responsive genre. For example, Teo (2012) notes that modern female writers of the sheik romance subgenre portray the Muslim Other in a more positive light, thus engaging with postcolonial views. This aligns with Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading, which approaches texts as sites of possibility, healing, and world-repair, rather than merely ideological critique. In the example provided by Teo, the Muslim Other is still somewhat stereotypical, but he is also the coveted love interest, the eventual happy ending, and the source of love and affection for the female protagonist, thus altering the predominantly negative portrayal of Middle Eastern characters. Kamblé (2023) also emphasizes the heroine's evolving journey toward self-representation and rejection of limiting societal roles (e.g., motherhood vs. career). She also notes that romance "normalizes the idea that only a woman has the right to determine how and when she does physical, mental, and creative work. Just as crucially, it models how the heroine can choose to do or decline emotional labor" (Kamblé 2023, 116). Contemporary scholarship establishes romance as a flexible narrative form capable of negotiating power, identity, and agency, providing a critical foundation for analyzing twenty-first-century fantasy romance.

Trauma studies provide a crucial framework for understanding how contemporary romance, and fantasy romance in particular, represents experiences of psychological rupture and recovery. Foundational trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a "double wound" (1996, 4), an experience that resists full narrative assimilation and returns belatedly, haunting the survivor through flashbacks, repetition, and even bodily symptoms. Dominick LaCapra (2014) differentiates between *acting out* and *working through*. While acting out is described as a state in which "tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (LaCapra 2014, 21), working through is the process that enables the integration of traumatic experience into a renewed sense of self and historical continuity. I find that these concepts are relevant for romance narratives that often

center on protagonists who are recovering from some sort of violence, loss, or emotional harm.

> Women suffer at the story's beginning, in various fashions small to grand, from living in this man's world .... The woman's conflicts may include shaming or lack of knowledge about her sexuality, anxiety about weight or appearance, the threat of rape, the memory of past trauma caused by a man, an overbearing or inattentive boyfriend, full-blown domestic or sexual abuse, low self-esteem, family pressures to get married, workplace discrimination, financial vulnerability, due to an inability to earn or control an income, or solo caregiver responsibilities (often for a child). (Roach 2016, 22)

Furthermore, it is common for romance novels to depict not only suffering but also eventual healing, so trauma is not only acknowledged but imaginatively resolved as well.

I argue that Sedgwick's reparative reading offers an interpretive bridge between trauma studies and romance scholarship. While paranoid reading privileges suspicion and the anticipation of harm, reparative reading offers an experience that strengthens the reader. Sedgwick is careful to emphasize that reparative practices do not deny the existence of violence or oppression, but they respond to such realities by seeking hope. Applied to contemporary fantasy romance, reparative reading shows how narratives of love often operate as mechanisms of trauma recovery. In these texts, romantic relationships model consent, reciprocity, and emotional validation as alternatives to silencing and hiding. This also aligns with LaCapra's notion of working through, the emphasis being on communication and mutual recognition. Thus, reparative romance not only supplies the reader with an escapist closure but also articulates frameworks through which trauma can be meaningfully transformed.

3. CLASSICAL ROMANCE TRADITIONS: AUSTEN, THE BRONTËS, AND THE GOTHIC LEGACY

The romance tradition that emerges from the nineteenth century, particularly in the works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, provides a crucial literary genealogy for understanding contemporary fantasy romance. These novels have been integrated into the literary canon as classics, and they are largely celebrated for their representations of women of the period. Today, Austen and the Brontës are recognized for their interrogation of gendered power relations and emotional dependency, and they showcase female protagonists with autonomy. Scholars emphasize that Austen's marriage plots are not merely romantic solutions but ethical structures through which women achieve moral clarity, social agency, and self-knowledge (Duckworth 2020; Knox-Shaw 2004). For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet rejects Mr. Darcy's first proposal because she views it as an insult to her integrity. This act of rejection also rejects social coercion, yet it serves as a catalyst for improvement for both the male and female characters. Elizabeth eventually recognizes how blinded

she was by her own pride, expressing that "[t]ill this moment, I never knew myself" (Austen 1894, 259), but Mr. Darcy is also required to let go of his own upbringing and his own prejudices as well. This first 'no' functions as a necessary pivot toward a self-reflection that characterizes the Austenian heroine. So, the eventual relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is only possible because it is not based on romantic surrender, but a clear self-realization and moral clarity, which grants a happy ending.

The Brontë sisters' contribution to the romance tradition also integrates Gothic elements, such as confinement, passion, and psychological intensity, into narratives of female development. I use Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to briefly explain this stylistic change, as some of the plot points in her novel are present in Maas's *ACOTAR* series as well. If Austen provides the social and ethical blueprint for the romance tradition, Charlotte Brontë introduces the psychological intensity and the Gothic interiority that define the genre's evolution into contemporary fantasy. In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine's development is inextricably linked to her navigation of a Gothic space. Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall is a "creepy-cozy dialectic" (Kreisel 2016, 103), a space that psychologically represents the characters, viewed by Rochester as a dungeon and a sinister, haunted place, whereas Jane often describes it as modern and beautiful (Brontë 1994). Jane leaves Thornfield Hall when her integrity is threatened. This gesture exemplifies a refusal of love that compromises selfhood. Hoeveler (1998) also notices that within Gothic romance, love is often staged as both danger and possibility, requiring the heroines to navigate environments structured by male authority and emotional volatility. The Byronic hero, dark, wounded, morally ambiguous, plays a central role in Gothic romance, yet his desirability is often counterbalanced by his potential for domination and destruction. Contemporary romance rewrites this figure by retaining his emotional depth while revising his relationship to power. As Teo notes, modern romance demands that the hero relinquish control and embrace relational equality: "American heroes who ensure that when the heroines fall in love with them, intense sexual desire is balanced with growing friendship, shared interests, shared ambitions, and shared humor" (Teo 2021, 471).

Collectively, scholarship on popular romance, feminist theory, trauma studies, reparative reading, and classical romance traditions establishes a critical framework for reading *ACOTAR* as a narrative invested in emotional repair and ethical intimacy. I aim to approach the series as a text that negotiates questions of power, agency, and healing through both genre conventions and intertextuality. By mobilizing romance as a reparative structure, *ACOTAR* aligns with long-standing feminist and Gothic romance traditions while responding to contemporary cultural conditions shaped by precarity.

4. SPACES OF CONFINEMENT AND RESTORATION IN *ACOTAR*

Romance, and romantasy in particular, operates as a complex narrative form in which the romantic arc is embedded within broader structures of world-building, political organization, and social hierarchy, often supplemented by elaborate magic

systems in fantasy contexts (Teo 2018; Kamblé 2023). While the central theme of romance novels is the romantic arc, it is often woven together with elements of complex world-building, political systems, social orders, and, in the case of fantasy romance, magic systems (Teo 2018; Kamblé 2023). *ACOTAR* exemplifies this perfectly: while it draws heavily from fairytale and classical romance traditions, it also situates the text within a critical postfeminist framework that emphasizes consent, agency, and emotional self-awareness, while simultaneously reproducing and negotiating traditional gender hierarchies (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). The main character of the first three novels, Feyre Archeron, is forced to cross the limits of the Mortal Lands, leave behind her family that relies on her for survival, and join her first love interest, Tamlin, in his manor in the Spring Court. Her first brush with the High Fae is against her will. She is roped into a complicated political game between the villain, Amarantha, and the High Lords of the seven Courts of Prythian, something she knows nothing about. Tamlin takes control of Feyre's life in order to save his own people from Amarantha's wrath. At first, he appears to be a liberating figure, someone who would help Feyre out of all of her troubles, the poverty, the real threat of starvation, etc. "Tamlin's jaw tightened. 'Your family is alive and well-cared for. You think so low of faeries that you believe I'd take their only source of income and nourishment and not replace it?'" (2023, 62). However, Feyre quickly learns that what may seem like a lifeline is slowly chipping away at her autonomy, revealing the limits of romance predicated on paternalistic protection.

Much like Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall, the Spring Court manor is both a luxurious estate and a space of imprisonment for Feyre. At first, as a human being, she is unable to see all the faeries who inhabit the space. She is essentially a captive in this land where anything could harm her. The Spring Court estate is described as "veiled in roses and ivy, with patios and balconies and staircases sprouting from its alabaster sides. The grounds were encased by woods, but stretched so far that I could barely see the distant line of the forest. So much color, so much sunlight and movement and texture" (2023, 47). The seasons never change in the Spring Court, it is always suspended in spring, a symbol of new life and fertility. This is the location where Feyre is confined to the most traditional gender roles. Elements of Gothic romance permeate the text in *ACOTAR*: a monstrous male figure is the captor of a woman of lower social standing, danger lurks around every corner, there are locked doors and secrets, fairytale elements that configure Feyre as a blameless victim, etc. As Hoeveler (1998, 9) explains, the "typical female gothic novel presents a blameless heroine triumphing through a variety of passive-aggressive strategies over a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the 'patriarchy'." The space itself is defined by patriarchal rule, the manor functions as a site of hypervisibility and simultaneous erasure. Tamlin's surveillance is framed as a form of protection, yet it also mirrors the Gothic trope of the "raving, lustful, greedy" (Hoeveler 1998, 10) patriarch who commonly abuses his power to restrict the woman. By eventually sealing Feyre in the manor, Tamlin completely strips her of her identity and agency. The climactic moment of entrapment, when Tamlin magically seals Feyre inside the manor, crystallizes this problem.

> He'd locked me in. He'd sealed me inside this house.
> I hurtled for the nearest window in the foyer and shoved it open. A cool spring breeze rushed in – and I shoved my hand through it – only for my fingers to bounce off an invisible wall. Smooth, hard air pushed against my skin.
> Breathing became difficult.
> I was trapped.
> I was trapped inside this house. I might as well have been Under the Mountain; I might as well have been inside that cell again– (2020a, 123)

This act of confinement triggers Feyre, who suffered the trauma of being locked up in a cell Under the Mountain. She suffers a panic attack, acts out (LaCapra 2014), her uncontrolled power melts "the ring off my finger until the golden ore dripped away into the void, the emerald tumbling after it" (2020a, 124). This moment is not only a clear rejection of Tamlin's love but also a refusal of a relational model that prioritizes control over consent and emotional survival, aligning with Gothic romance traditions in which the heroine's escape from confinement is a necessary precondition for ethical and reparative forms of love (Hoeveler 1998).

ACOTAR centers Tamlin as the only love interest, even though there are moments even in the first book that raise alarm bells. Tamlin is often coercive and abusive, even blaming Feyre for his uncontrollable behavior due to the influence of Spring Court magic that urges him to find a partner during the Calanmai celebration. "This explanation is characteristic of some fantasy texts in which the hero's actions are excused because of the influence of supernatural forces beyond his control" (Little & Moruzi 2021, 85), essentially providing an explanation for rape.

Feyre's departure from the Spring Court in *ACOMAF* closely parallels the Brontëan romance tradition, particularly Jane Eyre's decision to leave Rochester when their relationship threatens her moral autonomy. Jane's decision to leave is ethically necessary because "[f]or having left Rochester, having torn off the crown of thorns he offered and repudiated the unequal charade of marriage he proposed, Jane has now gained the strength to begin to discover her real place in the world" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 364). Feyre's escape functions in a similar way. By leaving Tamlin, she rejects a socially sanctioned but emotionally destructive form of love, thus prioritizing survival over romantic endurance. Her decision disrupts the patriarchal logic that frames male control as care and female suffering as devotion (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, Hoeveler 1998). Feyre's escape is therefore not merely narrative progression but ideological rupture: her decision disrupts a patriarchal model of romantic love that equates male control with care and positions female suffering as a form of devotion, which is identifiable in nineteenth-century romance (Gilbert & Gubar 2000). In contrast, as bell hooks argues, "[w]hen we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist" (2000, 5).

5. CONSENT, AGENCY, AND THE BYRONIC HERO

If the Spring Court operates as a Gothic site of confinement, Velaris, the capital city of the Night Court, emerges in *ACOMAF* as a reparative space and a model of alternative governance, structured around consent, collective care, and forms of affective justice that extend beyond the realm of romantic love. While the Spring Court is known as the last bastion against Amarantha's wrath, the Night Court is perceived as a place of nightmares, ruled by Rhysand, the cruelest High Lord. However, this myth is proven false as soon as Feyre sets foot in the Night Court. "The city had been built like a crust atop the rolling, steep hills that flanked the river, the buildings crafted from white marble or warm sandstone. ... No monsters. No darkness. Not a hint of fear, of despair. Untouched" (2020a, 142). Not only is Velaris safe from the war that devastated the rest of Prythian, but it is also a place where Feyre feels free, mainly because within this environment, she is also encouraged to articulate her desires, test her abilities, and reclaim aspects of herself that trauma had rendered inaccessible. Moreover, Rhysand's approach to intimacy contrasts sharply with Tamlin's. Rather than positioning himself as a protector, he consistently emphasizes Feyre's agency, repeatedly asking for her opinion, and, perhaps most importantly, once they officially become a couple, he creates a position within the Night Court that makes her equal to him, ruling as High Lady next to the High Lord. Rhysand explicitly reframes their relationship in terms of equality, declaring Feyre to be "my equal in every way," one who will "wear my crown, sit on a throne beside mine. Never sidelined, never designated to breeding and parties and child-rearing. My queen" (2020a, 620). The insistence on equality is not only symbolic, it marks a shift from hierarchical to negotiated power, thus reconfiguring romance as a partnership also grounded in shared authority rather than paternalistic protection.

Little and Moruzi read Feyre as the typical postfeminist heroine who does not understand that "she merely exchanged one form of captivity for another" (2021, 88). They also point out that "Feyre remains stereotypically feminine in her desire to remain protected by a powerful man. Although in many ways Rhys is a more positive male protagonist, as he encourages Feyre to expand her knowledge and power and persistently teaches her to read and control her magic, her first-person narration fails to acknowledge her subordinate position" (Little & Moruzi 2021, 87). However, this is a typical paranoid reading (Sedgwick 1997), grounded in an understanding of feminist progress as absolute independence, an expectation that romance as a genre complicates. As Kamblé (2023) suggests, the romance heroine's development lies not in rejecting relationality, but in gaining the authority to determine the conditions under which intimacy and emotional labor occur. Feyre's relationship with Rhysand can thus be read not as submission, but as a negotiated form of agency. As romance scholars have long noted, the romance narrative does not aim to produce autonomous subjects detached from relational structures, but rather imagines forms of intimacy that are ethically and emotionally sustaining (Regis 2003). An example of this is found in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), where Elizabeth Bennet's story does not culminate in self-sufficiency and the rejection of romantic attachment, but in a partnership that preserves her moral judgment and agency, while allowing

for emotional reliance. Both Elizabeth and Darcy have to undergo changes to accommodate each other. Austen's narrative makes it clear that the problem within their relationship is not dependence itself, but dependence structured by coercion and inequality. Similarly, in *ACOTAR*, Feyre does not simply substitute one captor for another. She leaves a partner who does not consider her his equal and, in Rhysand, finds a romantic relationship that also works as a negotiated partnership.

Feyre's relationship with Rhysand also demonstrates a very different way of dealing with her trauma, aligning with Dominick LaCapra's concept of working through (2014), which describes recovery from trauma not as a return to autonomy untouched by loss, but as a gradual integration of her traumatic experience into a renewed framework. Velaris, and Feyre's role within the Night Court, thus function as sites where vulnerability, dependence, and power are reconfigured into a form of intimacy that enables survival and ethical continuity rather than repetition of harm. It is important to note that *ACOMAF* does not depict this process of working through as immediate or unresisted. Even after her removal from the Spring Court, Feyre continues to exhibit somatic and affective symptoms of trauma. She vomits frequently, suffers from insomnia, and she is unable to paint, which is the main form of self-expression for her. These bodily responses indicate that her trauma has not yet been mediated. Her body registers what her narration initially cannot articulate. In LaCapra's terms, Feyre remains caught in a mode of acting out, where repetition and avoidance coexist with the desire for recovery. Velaris provides the material and relational conditions that enable a shift toward working through. Unlike the Spring Court, which demands silence and a grin-and-bear-it attitude, the Night Court is a space where vulnerability and agency are normalized. Rhysand cultivates an environment where Feyre can choose to improve herself, train, learn, rest, or even talk about her trauma if she wishes. This environment allows resistance itself to be absorbed into the healing process. Feyre's gradual return to painting and speech does not occur because trauma is overcome, but it is given space to exist. Thus, Feyre is able to practice working through. LaCapra points out that this process "should be understood as an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure and counteracts acting-out (or the repetition compulsion) without entirely transcending it, especially with respect to trauma and its aftermath" (2014, xxiii). Importantly, Rhysand's role in this process is not that of savior but of facilitator. He neither positions himself as Feyre's sole source of stability nor interprets her trauma on her behalf. On the contrary, he challenges her to push beyond her limits (e.g., he sends her into the cottage of a dangerous immortal being, the Weaver, to fetch her ring, using her new magical abilities), and refutes allegations by other High Lords that it was a political ploy to name her the High Lady of the Night Court. "'I made her High Lady,' Rhys said simply, lowering his hands from my face but not leaving my side, 'because I love her. Her power was the last thing I considered" (2020b, 441).

Rhysand's characterization deliberately invokes and revises the Byronic hero archetype central to nineteenth-century romance. Like Rochester, Darcy, or Heathcliff, Rhys is marked by darkness, secrecy, and brooding, which is also represented in his looks. "His short black hair gleamed like a raven's feathers, offsetting his pale skin and blue eyes so deep they were violet, even in the firelight" (2023,

189). The Byronic hero is usually consumed by guilt over sins he committed (Hoeveler 1998), appears to be morally grey, and, ultimately, is revealed to be redeemable (Crawford 2014). Rhysand leans into the myth of cruelty that surrounds him and the Night Court, but through his romantic connection to Feyre, it is revealed that his public-facing personality is a front to protect himself and his Court. Comparatively with the Inner Circle, a tight group of friends, he is laid-back and friendly. While Tamlin remains the villain, Rhysand's true self is revealed to be kinder and more progressive. Furthermore, he is interested in Feyre's desires and her consent. "Maas's novels reveal various ways that narratives encourage consent and sexual agency" (Speese 2024), particularly showcasing Rhysand plainly asking for consent verbally. "What is it that you want, Feyre?" (2020a) is asked by Rhysand multiple times and he only proceeds when she answers him. Moreover, Rhysand explicitly refuses to use his power of mind-reading to coerce or influence Feyre. He is known as "the most powerful High Lord in history" (2020a, 148), who can turn his enemies into a blood mist with his mind, without lifting a finger, yet he places himself on equal footing with Feyre, and the imminent danger of his power is never a threat to her. Thus, romantic fulfillment becomes inseparable from ethical behavior, reinforcing the series' reparative logic.

6. CONCLUSION

A Court of Thorns and Roses should not be read merely as escapist fantasy romance but as a reparative narrative that meaningfully engages questions of trauma, agency, and ethical intimacy. By situating the series within the traditions of popular romance, trauma studies, and classical Gothic romance, I have argued that Maas's work participates in a long-standing literary conversation about the conditions under which love can function as a site of healing rather than harm. Through a reparative reading, *ACOTAR* emerges as a text that does not deny violence, coercion, or psychological harm, but instead foregrounds the labor of recovery and the relational structures that make such recovery imaginable.

The contrast between the Spring Court and the Night Court crystallizes this argument. While the Spring Court reproduces Gothic patterns of confinement, surveillance, and paternalistic protection, the Night Court and Velaris offer a counter-space organized around choice, communal care, and respect. Feyre's movement between these spaces mirrors her gradual transition from acting out toward working through trauma (LaCapra 2014), a process that remains uneven and incomplete, as trauma is not something that can be undone, only integrated into one's healing. The series does not frame healing as a return to unmarked autonomy, nor does it present romance as a cure-all. Instead, recovery is shown as relational, negotiated, and sustained through environments that allow vulnerability without coercion.

Maas uses classical romance tropes, such as the Byronic hero and the transformative love plot, which in turn align *ACOTAR* with Austenian and Brontëan traditions while adapting them to contemporary concerns. Feyre's relationship with Rhysand does not signify a retreat into dependency, but rather a reconfiguration of

interdependence grounded in mutual recognition and shared power. Against paranoid readings that often equate feminist progress with absolute independence and a rejection of female fantasies, I argue that romance as a genre has always envisioned fulfillment through ethical attachment. Just like Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Rochester, Rhysand and Feyre establish their relationship as one of mutual healing and change.

Finally, the popularity of *ACOTAR*, amplified through digital reading communities such as BookTok[1], underscores the cultural resonance of reparative romance in a moment marked by precarity. Of course, there are plenty of aspects of the series that are worthy of criticism, such as the alpha male personalities of the male characters, the messy and underdeveloped political system, and the romanticization of extreme power imbalances, but there is also value recognized by millions of mostly female readers. The series' appeal lies not in its denial of harm, but in its insistence that love, when structured around consent, agency, and care, can offer readers imaginative resources for survival and hope. In this sense, *ACOTAR* exemplifies the ongoing evolution of romance fiction as a genre capable of engaging critically with the emotional and ethical demands of contemporary life, reaffirming its relevance both within and beyond the literary canon.

Reviews sent to the author: 31/05/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 12/06/2026

[1] BookTok has had a significant impact on contemporary publishing, particularly in the romance and fantasy romance markets, where reader-driven promotion has contributed to the commercial success and renewed visibility of titles such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. As recent scholarship notes, BookTok not only functions as a marketing mechanism but also as a participatory interpretive space in which readers collectively engage with themes of trauma, desire, and emotional healing (Balling and Martens 2024; Niebling 2025).

WORKS CITED

Austen, Jane. 1894. *Pride and Prejudice*. Chiswick P.

Balling, Gitte & Marianne Martens. 2024. "BookTok Helped Us Sell It: How TikTok Disrupts Publishing and Fuels the #Romantasy Boom." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media* Technologies. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241301271.

Brontë, Charlotte. 1994. *Jane Eyre.* Penguin Books.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP.

Crawford, Joseph. 2014. *The Twilight of the Gothic?* U of Wales P. https://perlego.com/book/573141.

Duckworth, Alistair M. 2020. *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels.* Johns Hopkins UP.

Felski, Rita. 2011. "Suspicious Minds." *Poetics Today* 32(2): 215–234. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-1261208.

Gilbert, Sandra M., & Susan Gubar. 2000. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP.

Gill, Rosalind. 2007. *Gender and the Media*. Polity Press.

Grady, Constance. 2024. "Why half the people you know are obsessed with this book series." *Vox* (February 27). Accessed 15 May 2025. https://www.vox.com/culture/24084037/sarah-j-maas-a-court-of-thorns-and-roses-aco1tar-romantasy.

Hoeveler, Diane Long. 1998. *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës.* Pennsylvania State UP.

hooks, bell. 2001. *All About Love: New Visions.* William Morrow.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2023. *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*. Indiana UP.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo, eds. 2021. *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge.

Knox-Shaw, Peter. 2004. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge UP.

Kreisel, Deanna K. 2016. "The Madwoman on the Third Story: *Jane Eyre* in Space." *PMLA* 131(1): 101-15. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.101.

LaCapra, Dominick. 2014. *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Johns Hopkins UP.

Little, Elizabeth & Kristine Moruzi. 2021. "Postfeminism and Sexuality in the Fiction of Sarah J. Maas." In *Sexuality in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, ed. Paul Venzo & Kristine Moruzi. Routledge.

Maas, Sarah J. 2020a. *A Court of Mist and Fury.* Bloomsbury.

Maas, Sarah J. 2020b. *A Court of Wings and Ruin.* Bloomsbury.

Maas, Sarah J. 2023. *A Court of Thorns and Roses.* Bloomsbury.

Markert, John. 2021. "Publishing the Romance Novel." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change.* Sage.

Niebling, Laura. 2025. "Consent capital: From Romantasy's "Alpha male archetypes" toward a new cultural theory in post-digital storytelling." *New Media & Society* 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251375107.

Pérez-Fernández, Irene & Carmen Pérez Ríu. 2021. "Romantic Escapes in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction." In *Post-Millennial Trends in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction*. Peter Lang.

Radway, Janice A. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. The U of North Carolina P.

Regis, Pamela. 2003. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel.* U of Pennsylvania P.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Yale UP.

Roach, Catherine M. 2016. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana UP.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1997. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Introduction is about You." In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Duke UP.

Speese, Erin K. Johns. 2024. "Came for the Smut, Stayed by Consent: Desire and Consent in Sarah J. Maas's Fictional Worlds." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 13 (August 1). https://doi.org/10.70138/UJXK7901.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2012. *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels.* U of Texas P.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2021. "Love and Romance Novels." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

PROBING A CULTURALLY UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP: THE UNEXPECTEDLY TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF UNROMANTIC LOVE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *THE POLE*

Marie Herbillon
Université de Liège

Abstract

Although *The Pole* is not set in a traditionally (post)colonial context, navigating as it does between Spain and Poland, J. M. Coetzee's latest novella emerges as a subtle yet efficient vehicle for cultural critique, one that engages in intercultural negotiations and, more specifically, addresses the imbalanced relationship between representatives of 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' European nations. Next to examining these issues that shed light on Coetzee's political agenda, this essay looks, more generally, at the ways in which the author reassesses the cultural (i.e. musical and literary) legacies of Romanticism with a view to questioning the Western ideal of romantic love as a cultural construct. I also explore how he embraces romance and appropriates some of its narrative codes in order to open up intertextual dialogue with a European classic of that literature, namely Dante Alighieri's first work *La Vita Nuova*. Finally, I rely on the notion of "flat affect," which Lauren Berlant has defined as a mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193), to try and show how Coetzee's self-reflexive strategy of revision allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *The Pole,* Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova,* Cultural Asymmetries, Legacies of Romanticism, Romantic Narratives.

UNA RELACIÓN MARCADA POR LA DESIGUALDAD CULTURAL A EXAMEN: LOS EFECTOS INESPERADAMENTE TRANSFORMADORES DEL AMOR NO ROMÁNTICO EN *THE POLE* DE J. M. COETZEE

Resumen

Aunque *The Pole* no se sitúa en un contexto (pos)colonial tradicional, al desarrollarse entre España y Polonia, la última novela corta de J. M. Coetzee funciona como vehículo sutil pero eficaz de crítica cultural, que aborda la relación desequilibrada entre representantes de naciones europeas 'dominantes' y 'no dominantes'. Además de examinar estos aspectos que revelan la agenda política de Coetzee, en este ensayo analizo cómo el autor reevalúa los legados culturales (musicales y literarios) del Romanticismo para cuestionar el ideal occidental del amor romántico. También exploro cómo Coetzee abraza el género romántico y se apropia de algunos de sus códigos narrativos para entablar un diálogo intertextual con *La Vita Nuova* de Dante Alighieri. Finalmente, recurro ala noción de "afecto plano" definida por Lauren Berlant como una forma de "emoción subdesempeñada" (2015, 193), para mostrar cómo la estrategia autorreflexiva de revisión de Coetzee le permite cuestionar la arquetipalidad de la narrativa romántica y, en última instancia, ampliar los límites del género.

Palabras clave: J. M. Coetzee, *The Pole (El polaco),* Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova,* asimetrías culturales, legados del romanticismo, narrativas románticas.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.02
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 35-58; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole* (2023) is a contemporary romance of sorts, bringing together Witold Walczykiewicz, a renowned 72-year-old Polish pianist, and Beatriz, a Spanish patron of the arts in her late forties whose Concert Circle stages classical recitals in Barcelona. In this text, however, the 2003 Nobel Prize laureate goes beyond depicting the difficulties inherent in a love story involving an age gap and deploying across geographical borders, one in which the protagonists are forced to communicate in a language –English– that is not the mother tongue of either. Indeed, Coetzee's latest novella also takes on a political dimension inasmuch as it probes the complexities of a culturally unequal relationship: the fact that Beatriz is, at first, reluctant to return Witold's affections may simply stem from her own (hardly interrogated) incuriosity about Poland, a country that seems as "stuck in the past" as her all-too-unmodern suitor, who is repeatedly portrayed as "a man from another era" (71; see also 72, 90) and constantly reduced to his nationality –from the title onwards, he is consistently referred to as 'the Pole'– as a result of his supposedly unpronounceable surname.

As Coetzee lays bare Beatriz's unacknowledged assumptions of cultural superiority, he also arguably seeks to challenge the Western R/romantic ideal, i.e. what is predominantly conceived of and valued as R/romantic in twenty-first-century societies: when spelt with a capital letter, the term will refer to nineteenth-century Romanticism as an aesthetic-historical tradition, whose cultural and affective legacies are still pervasive today, though in potentially altered forms; when used below, a lower-case letter will precisely represent our contemporary, looser understanding of the word, which takes its cue from, as much as it may distort or simplify, such legacies. In practice, we will see that while Beatriz accuses Witold, even after his death, of having "had the whole creaking edifice of romantic love behind [him]" (Coetzee 2023, 145), she is the one who is disappointed by the utterly unromantic, "at-a-distance renderings" (46) of this unconventional interpreter of Chopin, who strove to offer a "revisionary" yet "historically authentic" (5) reading of his fellow countryman's music. In the same way as she regards him as "too old in spirit for music ... that belongs to more ardent souls" (38), she deplores that he lacks the words, in English just as in any language, to seduce her in accordance with the usual conventions of R/romantic love. Predictably, such "theatrics" (140) are equally absent from Witold's postmortem literary legacy, which consists in a collection of 84 poems in Polish, insofar as this "book of Beatrice, put together by an obscure follower of Dante" (103), confirms that the Italian master's disciple was a man who "lack[ed] the art that quickens the word" (138). Yet, the Spanish translation of these poems will enable Beatriz to understand how unexpectedly powerful a trace Witold, as "*[a] spectre from the past*" (55, italics in original), left in her.

Although *The Pole* is not set in a traditionally (post)colonial context, navigating as it does between Spain and Poland, the novella emerges as a subtle yet efficient vehicle for cultural critique, one that engages in intercultural negotiations and, more specifically, addresses the imbalanced relationship between representatives of 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' European nations. Next to examining these issues

that shed light on Coetzee's political agenda, this essay looks, more generally, at the ways in which the author reassesses the cultural (i.e. musical and literary) legacies of Romanticism with a view to questioning the Western ideal of romantic love as a cultural construct. I also explore how he embraces romance and appropriates some of its narrative codes in order to open up intertextual dialogue with a European classic of that literature, namely Dante Alighieri's first work *La Vita Nuova*. Finally, I rely on the notion of "flat affect," which Lauren Berlant has defined as a mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193), to try and show how Coetzee's self-reflexive strategy of revision allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

2. *THE POLE*'S PUBLICATION HISTORY: QUESTIONING THE GLOBAL DOMINANCE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The peculiarities of *The Pole*'s publication history are relevant insofar as they touch upon a theme that features centrally in J. M. Coetzee's œuvre and in this text in particular: that of power relationships and cultural asymmetries, both across the world's hemispheres and in the Global North. Coetzee's novella was first published in the fall of 2022 by the Argentinian press El Hilo de Ariadna, in a Spanish translation titled *El polaco*; it did not come out in English (the language it was originally written in) until the following year, as a stand-alone novel in the United States and, in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, together with five appended stories penned over the previous two decades (four of which, namely "As a Woman Grows Older," "The Old Woman and the Cats," "The Glass Abattoir" and "Hope," centre on the recurring character of Elizabeth Costello while the fifth, "The Dog," first appeared in 2018 in the Spanish-language version of *Seven Moral Tales* (*Siete Cuentos Morales*) under the title "El Perro." This was Coetzee's third book in a row to have been initially published in the Southern Hemisphere– a strategy that has been seen as "a conscious and political choice" (Fox-Martens 2023). Indeed, the symbolic importance of "publishing in the South before the North" (Coetzee qtd. in Harbour 2022) has been stressed by Coetzee himself, providing him with "a way of challenging [the] entitlement" (Fox-Martens 2023) of English on the global scene. In *Speaking in Tongues*, a recently published dialogue between Coetzee and his Argentinian translator, Mariana Dimópulos, the authors extensively discuss their desire to destabilise what they identify as "a network of linguistic dominance" (2025, xii) –one that tends to hierarchise world languages– through their own "unusual" project, whose goal was "to make *El polaco* the 'original' text, in the sense that all further translations would proceed from the Spanish text, not the English" (xvi). Although this plan was eventually "thwarted by pressures from within the publishing industry" (xvi), it "had a political dimension too, arising from [their] growing concern about the global spread of the English language, including concern about the imbalance in the trade in translations worldwide: far more books are translated each year *out of* English than are translated *into* English" (xvii, italics in original).

Crucially, the project of unsettling the status of English as a donor language in order to place Coetzee's English text and its Spanish translation on an equal footing –or even to make the latter a new original "intended to carry no marks of a secondary status" (29)– is closely interrelated with the "unusually bodiless and unlocated" (60) English in which *The Pole* is written. One of the reasons why Coetzee's language in this book "lacks the solidity (semantic but sonic too) that characterizes most high-quality English" is that "by the time [he] began to compose it, [he] had reached a point in [his] life where [he] was seriously concerned about the English language as a global political force"; in the writer's own words: [i]t was my intention that no translation—no "good" translation—of the book should be inferior to the English, and thus that the notion of an "original" version of *The Pole*/*El polaco* could be brought into question (61). To some extent, the peculiarly disembodied quality of Coetzee's English in *The Pole* also ties in with the mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193) Berlant has defined as "flat affect" –I will return in more detail below to the ways in which Coetzee uses such underperformative language to renew the conventions of the romantic narrative (see Section 8).

However, while publishing in Spanish first has allowed him to question the global dominance of English, his seemingly uncritical approach to Spanish –another major hegemonic language since early colonial days– has been pointed out as "a missed opportunity for reckoning with a significant linguistic conflict": although *The Pole* is mostly set in Barcelona, neither Catalonia's "specific political context" nor "the Catalan linguistic dilemma" (Fox-Martens 2023) are explicitly acknowledged. Yet, beyond this apparent non-recognition of the hegemony of Spanish over minor European languages, it can be argued that the imbalances between 'unequal' European cultures are subtly addressed in the narrative, through Coetzee's portrayal of Beatriz and Witold's relationship, and particularly through the former's biased perception of Poland (see Section 4).

3. J. M. COETZEE AND POLISHNESS

In "From the Heart of the Country to the European Core: J. M. Coetzee and *los polacos*," Robert Kusek convincingly investigates what another commentator has broadly termed a "politics of Polishness" (Wilson 2023) and thoroughly analyses the writer's "decades-long, multifaceted, and, essentially, transnational dialogue with Poland and its cultural production" as "an attempt to seek one's rightful ancestry: literary and cultural, as well as genetic" (Kusek 2023, 267). As Coetzee was drafting *Summertime* (2009), the final volume of his "*autre*-biographical trilogy" (267) *Scenes from Provincial Life* while "researching his family's genealogy" (269), he discovered that he had Polish roots and that "his great-grandfather (hitherto referred to as Balthazar du Biel) was not a German but a Pole: one Balcer Dubiel born in 1844 in the village of Czarnylas in the Prussia-annexed territory of Poland" and "recognized as the first writer in the family" (271) –hence Coetzee's ostensible identification with this ancestor. In Coetzee's compelling conversation with Dimópulos, where his family's linguistic background is addressed at some length, he explicitly refers to his

maternal great-grandfather: "[o]n my mother's side I am descended from a Pole who left Europe in the 1880s" (2025, 19). He further explains that this man "[b]orn in Prussian-ruled Silesia" (19) first "Germanized himself by changing his name," before heading for the United States, then on to South Africa, and describes this aspect of his personal history as a case in which, "for the sake of social advancement, a mother tongue—first Polish, then German—was abandoned in favour of a father language, first German, then English" (20). By the same token, his father's forebears were led to Anglicize themselves over time:

> [o]n my father's side I am descended from people who migrated from the Netherlands to the southern tip of Africa in the seventeenth century. During the Napoleonic Wars this little Dutch colony was taken over by the British, and its inhabitants became subjects of the British Crown. My ancestors accommodated themselves to their new masters, conducting their public life in English while continuing to speak Dutch at home—Dutch which, in its heavily creolized form, would become known as Afrikaans. Again we have a story of a mother tongue—Dutch—being abandoned in favour of a more powerful father tongue, English. (20)

Subsequent parts of this complex historical backdrop also illustrate the "intensely political" (22) dimension of the language of schooling in particular, which caused the young Coetzee to turn into a "child who masters the English language but is not a member of the Anglo culture" (23) from which he has become estranged:

> [i]n my case, to both the maternal and the paternal sides of my family, English—the master tongue—seemed to be the way to the future, and an English-language education the best way of ensuring that a child would prosper. ...Yet, [b]y the time I arrived on the scene in the 1940s, the reactionary Afrikaner nationalist movement was on the point of taking over political power. The current that had borne so many Afrikaans speakers into anglophony began to be reversed; and a cohort of children like myself was left stranded, at home neither among the Afrikaner-nationalist majority nor among the suddenly powerless Anglo minority. (22-23)

Coetzee further clarifies how, although he later became an "'English' writer" (24) in South Africa, "retrospective doubts" started to "creep in ... about [his] adoption of the English language" (xiii) and how these doubts gradually affected the nature of his own language:

> I began to question my position in the system, as an assimilated foreigner whose very mastery of the master language seemed to confirm that it was only natural that English should rule the world. I had always felt foreign in Anglo culture, felt like an imposter. ... The language of my books began to take on a more abstract quality. I had lost interest in sounding like a native—that is, a native English speaker. What was going on? I told myself I was feeling my way towards a rootless language, a language divorced from any sociocultural home. (25-26)

Arguably, this process culminates in the "null linguistic state" of *The Pole*, a book that its author "deliberately starved ... of what [he] think[s] of as native

nutriments" in order "to emphasize [his] personal rupture with [the English language]" (61), thereby also feeding into a sense of affective "flatness," or emotional underperformance, which –somewhat paradoxically, perhaps –contributes to refreshing the romantic genre (see Section 8).

Coetzee's "preoccupation with Polish literature and culture" nevertheless predates his genealogical discovery: as Kusek proceeds to explain, it is "part of a larger strategy of seeking new alliances and partnerships across the north-south/east-west divide" by "building an alternative 'affective community'" (2023, 267) as well as "initiating and sustaining the conversation with [a] minor culture and literature" (271). Coetzee's "lifelong concern with the life and work of Zbigniew Herbert" (273) is discussed at length, along with his interest in other Polish writers such as Stanisław Barańczak, Andrzej Konwicki, Jerzy Kosiński, Czesław Miłosz, Andrzej Munk, Bruno Schulz, Wisława Szymborska, Aleksander Wat (see 272), Witold Gombrovicz or the linguist Anna Wierzbicka, whose book *Imprisoned English* (2013) is, "in hindsight, ... considered instrumental in Coetzee's growing alienation from English and decision to publish his latest works in Spanish translation" (273). In this context, *The Pole* –in which the name of yet another Polish writer, Cyprian Norwid, also appears (see Coetzee 2023, 126)– is read not only as Coetzee's "latest addition to his long-standing dialogue with Poland" but also as both "the most profound, complex, and extensive means of addressing [his] concern with Polish cultural heritage to this day" (Kusek 2023, 279) and "an act of self-identification with his ... Polishness" (285). More particularly, Kusek views the figure of Witold as "a commixture of selves," i.e. "a 'mask' that stands for (or hides) a number of other Poles" (namely Gombrowicz, Chopin and Herbert), and as "an avatar of Coetzee himself" (285) –I will go back to his male protagonist's elective affinity with Frédéric (born Fryderyk Franciszek) Chopin in *The Pole*.

4. AN IMBALANCED RELATIONSHIP: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ASYMMETRIES IN *THE POLE*

Inasmuch as Kusek primarily lays emphasis on the value Coetzee ascribes to his (real and imaginary) Polish lineage, he only tangentially engages with the ways in which western European nations perceive eastern ones. Interestingly, Coetzee once described Poland as a central-eastern "country with an *embattled* Western culture" (1991, 19, italics added), one that might be disregarded by more centrally positioned European nations. Although the Spanish language is not directly destabilised in *The Pole* (see Section 2), Spain's potential yet unacknowledged complex of cultural superiority over Poland is –often comically– exemplified on several occasions through the character of Beatriz, on whom the third-person narrative is focalised (except in the sixth and final part, where she addresses the late Witold in the second person). Indeed, the ironic remarks with which the narrator mimics Beatriz's thoughts and bits of conversation ironically demonstrate, at best, her lack of knowledge about Poland and, at worst, the extent of her deep-seated (though unwitting) cultural prejudices. To her, Poland is a country of "difficult" (Coetzee 2023, 16; see also 35) names,

whose language she lumps together with Russian, overlooking the fact that speaking Russian to Poles might be "insult[ing]" (95) due to a history of oppression imposed on Poland by the Russian Empire (see Kusek 2023, 270). When Witold invites her to accompany him to Brazil, her reaction –"this is not how a man goes about luring a woman into going off to Brazil with him. Perhaps it works in Poland, but not here" (Coetzee 2023, 35)– denotes a culturally condescending take on Polish lovers as backward and uncouth; she indulges in cultural clichés about "authentic Polish food (what might that be? blood sausages, boiled potatoes, sauerkraut?)" (105); and most of all, without examining her own cultural incuriosity (see 71) any further, she blames Poland for its seemingly hopeless lack of modernity, dismissing it as a county that is as "stuck in the past" as Witold himself is "a man from another era" (71).

Beatriz and Witold's relationship is also a linguistically asymmetrical one. As previously indicated, English is neither's native tongue but their respective command of that language –the only one they have in common– is, in fact, quite different: while Beatriz, who "comes from a cultivated family" (117), is "fluent in the language" "after her two years at Mount Holyoke," Witold only speaks it "after a fashion" (15), so much so that "[i]t is sometimes hard to know what the man means, with his incomplete English. Is he saying something profound or is he simply hitting the wrong words, like a monkey sitting in front of a typewriter?" (59). Witold himself concedes to Beatriz that he is "not clever like [her] in the English language" (62). Even when the linguistic barrier seems to have been overcome through intercourse (upon their third meeting, in her husband's Mallorcan family house), the narrator bitingly observes that they offer "[a] comical spectacle, the two of them, making their love in English, a tongue whose erotic reaches are closed to them" (83) despite Beatriz's greater proficiency. In any case, such linguistic asymmetries –in addition to the cultural ones– preclude them from achieving "*the equality of loving feeling and commitment*" (Weisser 2013, 6, italics in original, qtd. in Teo 2021, 457) that constitutes a "modern expectation" regarding romantic love, which –as opposed to a premodern ideal involving no "expectation of reciprocity"– has been defined, since the late twentieth century, as "a journey of growth [...] through which men and women become equal" (Teo 2021, 479; see also Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 3).

5. REASSESSING THE CULTURAL LEGACIES OF ROMANTICISM

5.1. Rehistoricising Chopin: towards a more informed understanding of Romantic music

Since Witold unambiguously declares that he is "a musician" (Coetzee 2023, 18), "not a poet" (32), Beatriz "is prepared to entertain the idea that what the man cannot express in his bare-bones English, he will be able to express through [an] art" (37-38) he deems "most important" (18), namely music. Once again, she will be disappointed. When she finally listens to the CD –his recording of the Chopin Nocturnes (24)– he had sent her after the Barcelona recital, she remains quite

insensitive to the "dry, ... matter-of-fact" (38) renderings by this "noted interpreter of Poland's national composer" (119). As "a real Pole" (14), he is indeed expected to have made his fellow countryman's music his own like no other performer, as if mere nationality was the one key to unravelling "*the mystery of Chopin that foreigners will never understand*" (23, italics in original). In this respect, Jasmine Liu (2023) has aptly commented on Beatriz's "frequent reference to nationalities as shorthand for typecasting others" (including Witold, the titular 'Pole', and Chopin) as being "part of her no-nonsense constitution." Later, Beatriz is similarly unmoved by an audio file of Chopin's B minor sonata, recorded "for [her] alone" (Coetzee 2023, 53) in the hope that the music would speak to her: "In English I cannot say what is in my heart, therefore I say it in music. Please listen, I pray to you" (49). In Beatriz's opinion, Witold is "too old in spirit for music ... that belongs to more ardent soul" (38), even though she paradoxically "doubts" that there is room in her life for "real, impetuous ardour" (39). Arguably, her insensitivity to Witold's Chopin, as opposed to that of more intense interpreters like the non-fictional Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau, deemed "*a better interpreter*" (23; italics in original), thus results from unexamined R/romantic expectations, which allows Coetzee to question what is predominantly conceived of as R/romantic in twenty-first-century Western societies. [1]

In the aforementioned 1991 lecture, a rejoinder to T. S. Eliot's homonymous essay, Coetzee answers the titular question –"what is a classic?"– as follows: the classic is that which "defines itself by surviving," i.e. "what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs," whereas "criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic" (19). In this text, Coetzee, most of whose work is "in dialogue" (Fox-Martens 2023) with that of (mostly Western) canonical artists, be they literary or musical, relates an epiphanic moment when, as a teenager in South Africa, he heard Johann Sebastian Bach (a recording of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord) for the first time in 1955 and wonders, in two alternative readings (the one 'transendental-poetic', the other 'sociocultural'), whether his response to Bach partook of "some inherent quality in the music" (Coetzee 1991, 18) –as if "the spirit of Bach was speaking to [him] across the ages" (10)– or of "a symbolic election on [his] part of European high culture as a way out of a social and historical dead end" (18). The gist of his answer is that "[h]istorical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present" (15). In other words, our understanding and performance of a classic (Bach, in the event) is hardly ever pure or absolute but is, most of the time, "historically conditioned in ways invisible to us" (14). In the case Coetzee's lecture is concerned with, "the notion of the classic as the timeless is undermined by a fully historical account of Bach-reception" (15-16): at the end of the composer's lifetime, he was "a man of yesterday" who had "no presence in society,"

[1] R/romantic spelt, as indicated above, with both a capital letter as a reference to the nineteenth-century artistic movement and a lower-case letter that represents our contemporary, looser use of the term.

i.e. was "not only not canonical" but "not public" (13); it is not until his 'rediscovery' and rehabilitation by Felix Mendelssohn that he "was promoted as a classic" and, in the wake of the early "Romantic swing against rationalism" (13), "became part of the construction of Germany and even the so-called Germanic race" (14).

To some extent, Coetzee's reflection on Bach also applies to Chopin and ties in with ongoing debates about the ideal balance between historical practice and contemporary sensibility. Indeed, our understanding and performance of Chopin has changed significantly over time. A study of performance traditions suggests an evolution from Chopin's intimate salon style to more flamboyant Romantic interpretations, especially with *rubato*, before a modern return to greater restraint and historical accuracy. Ironically, then, although Chopin (1810-1849) is part of the so-called 'Generation of 1810', which includes other early Romantics like Mendelssohn (1809-1847), Robert Schumann (1810-1856) or Franz Liszt (1811-1886), his own style of playing was antithetical to what we understand, today, as the defining features of Romanticism. It nevertheless appears that this allegedly 'Romantic', i.e. robust, "hard" and "percussive," playing style –a possible "reaction against the branding of the Franco-Polish master as a delicate, dreamy, 'feminine' spirit" (Coetzee 2023, 5)– is entirely at odds with Chopin's "subtle tonal shadings and nuances so admired by his contemporaries" (Ho Sze-Hwei 2012, 54). In this regard, it should be remembered that Chopin composed some of his pieces (like the Preludes) "on an upright Pleyel piano," which is "not cross-strung and hence less resonant" (77) than grand pianos such as modern Steinways. Since "tonal balance and subtleties" (54) could not be adequately captured by recording technology (which did not exist during Chopin's lifetime), "[d]ecades of performance may have unwittingly resulted in a 'standard' reading of a piece" (65), though one that was not in keeping with Chopin's historical interpretation. Yet, as Grace Ho Sze-Hwei argues in her thesis entitled "Changing Chopin: Posthumous Variants and Performance Approaches," it is by "trying to maintain a certain level of restraint characteristic of the composer that we come closer to the sound world or practices familiar to him" (2). Unlike many modern pianists, who still break with Chopin's original aesthetics, Witold is said to have "led the way for a new generation of Chopin interpreters in his native land," with a "revisionary" (Coetzee 2023, 5), i.e. "controversial" (3) but "historically authentic" reading of the composer "as soft-toned and Italianate" (5). As Tom LeClair has rightly noted, Witold's "recordings have achieved some notice by *minimizing*" what is generally perceived as "the Romantic qualities of his fellow Pole" (2023, italics added): "his Chopin is not at all Romantic but on the contrary somewhat austere, Chopin as inheritor of Bach" (Coetzee 2023, 3). When Beatriz, in her first postmortem letter to Witold (reproduced in the text's sixth section), keeps blaming the latter for his allegedly "tight little readings" that contrast with "the real Chopin interpreters'" (140), she is, then, the one whose Romantic expectations and, by extension, conception of Romanticism are narrow and historically inaccurate.

5.2. Romantic literature and its limiting impact on our (and Beatriz's) conception of romantic love(rs)

Another important legacy of Romanticism is our contemporary understanding of romantic love. Romantic love, Hsu-Ming Teo submits, does "not exist independently of historically-specific societies": it "is not a specific, precise emotion" but "a bundle of ideas, values, and feelings, and a historically changeable set of cultural practices" (2021, 454). As Teo further contends, "[t]hat romantic love is socially and culturally constituted, and historically contingent" (454), also has major implications for the ways in which it is represented in fiction (and in romance novels especially). Some fictional texts have, in turn, proved particularly influential in (Western) literary history, as well as instrumental in the circulation of given, historically-situated romantic conceptions. For instance, through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, who had herself been a novelist "influenced by the Romantic movement's emphasis on primal emotion and the extreme experience of passion and the sublime," arguably had a strong "influence on modern romance novels" (464) and the modern romantic ideal (in the West, at least): she has affected "our contemporary ideas of romantic love so that we now expect uninhibited feeling, intense passion, and the drama of strong emotion to define romance" (Weisser 4, qtd. in Teo 2021, 464-465). In the process, "Brontë's Rochester –morally flawed, emotionally unrestrained, compelling in his passion and redeemed by love at the end– " has become the "model" (466) for contemporary romantic heroes. It can be posited that *Wuthering Heights* – another classic of Romantic literature composed by Charlotte Brontë's sister Emily and published in 1847 as well– has further entangled Romanticism with a specific take on romantic love, since it has strengthened the idea according to which the intensity of affect in relationships could even verge on violence, though without deliberately seeking to aestheticise the latter: while Heathcliff's brutality brings him closer to the figure of the romantic anti-hero, he has come to epitomise a dark yet archetypally romantic ideal in contemporary public consciousness (see Betzer 2026). In an essay analysing Coetzee's relationship with the women of the canon, Gillian Dooley remarks that none of the great female authors of history has found her "way into any of his critical writings" (2019, 116). Emily Brontë is one of the few female writers mentioned in his creative body of work, where he has nonetheless often engaged –controversially so at times– with the white woman experience and prioritised female characters or narrators (see Kossew & Harvey 2019, 3).[2] In his

[2] Coetzee has sometimes "been the target of a feminist critique for his representation of women" (Attridge 2019, 39), female narrators especially: scholars like Benita Parry have accused him of "discursive aggression" (1996, 50, qtd Attridge 2019, 39), since "imitating women's writing" potentially amounts to "ironically replicating the male power he is critiquing" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 6), while "[o]ther critics [...] have seen his deployment of women narrators as representing voices marginalised by patriarchy and a lack of authority (even though this positionality is troubled by their white privilege) that broadly supports a feminist perspective (Kossew, 1993; Probyn-Rapsey, 2002; Wright, 2008)" (7). Derek Attridge underlines that Coetzee's "adoption of female voices and subjectivities" relates "to

"*autre*-biographical text *Youth*, the second volume of the above-mentioned trilogy (see Section 3), Brontë is portrayed by Coetzee's narrator, John, as one of the only "[w]omen" endowed with "the sacred fire" (Coetzee 2002, 66, qtd. in Dooley 2019, 116). Despite this apparent respect for Emily Brontë's inner, art-inducing flame, part of her literary legacy is qualified –along with that of other female Victorian writers (i.e. Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot)– in *Elizabeth Costello*. In response to an interviewer who raises "the whole issue of male authors who give voice to female characters 'in the name of their liberation' but in fact only use them to further a male philosophy" (Attridge 2019, 42), the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee's possible alter ego) objects that "*women* have created *male* stereotypes too, citing Heathcliff, Rochester, and Casaubon" (43, italics in original). As Derek Attridge points out in an article dedicated to Coetzee's female characters and the limits of the sympathetic imagination, "[t]o the extent that Costello can be regarded as expressing Coetzee's own views –and of course things are never that simple– it is possible to argue that ... he regards the creation of stereotypes as a failing exhibited by writers of both genders" (43). In *The Pole*, Coetzee arguably undertakes the project –however obliquely– of "reclaiming the Heathcliffs and Rochesters from romantic stereotyping too, to say nothing of poor old dusty Casaubon" (2004, 14) and, more broadly, of coming to grips with the limiting impact of Romantic literature on our (and Beatriz's) conception of romantic love(rs). Such a project suggests that, much as "the major Victorian novelists of either sex" seemed to "have had little perceptible influence on him" (Dooley 2019, 116),[3] the Romantic vision of some may have left a somewhat paradoxical trace in his latest work of fiction, where the forces underlying

the broader question of the ethical response to the other, summarised by Elizabeth Costello with the well-known formulation, 'the sympathetic imagination'" (2019, 40): to what extent is it ethical to "to inhabit the consciousness of the 'other'" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 6), including that of women? Laura Wright also sees Coetzee's work as being concerned with "the ethics of voicing the so-called other" (2019, 24): in her view, it "is acutely aware of the limitations of embodiment" and "consistently critiques the notion that one can realistically portray anything, much less that which one is not" (2019, 35). Still, Coetzee's fiction attempts, in particular, to problematise the ambivalent "position of white womanhood" (21), one in which white women are "problematically situated as both white oppressors and subordinate patriarchal subjects" (23). Although the author's approach to such 'oppression' is less frontally political in *The Pole* than it may be in narratives set in more obviously (post)colonial contexts (see Introduction), relational asymmetries resulting from Beatriz's position of cultural and linguistic dominance are unambiguously addressed (see Section 4).

[3] In "Art and the Female in *Youth*: Between Joyce and Beckett," Paul Stewart contends that Coetzee's male narrator, John, is "certainly conditioned by Romantic conceptions of accessing the sublime" (2019, 77). In particular, the conception based on the transfiguration into art of life-experiences involving the figure of the female is shown to derive from "the aesthetics of English Romanticism" (84), more specifically from the male Romantic author Percy Bysshe Shelley. It can then be argued that while *The Pole* is comparably "informed by the weight of the male [and pre-Romantic, in this case] literary tradition and its figuration of the female" (Stewart 2019, 85), through its playful intertextual dialogue with Dante's work and his famous heroine Beatrice (see Sections 6 & 7), it *also* investigates the textual production of 'man', not least that of stereotypical male heroes by Romantic women writers.

the (potentially violent) legacy of a Western literary tradition –Romanticism– are subtly denounced rather than celebrated.

In *The Pole*, Beatriz appears –though unconsciously– to have inherited this Romantic paradigm, which reductively tends to equate love with emotional excess. She, who once had an "insatiable" (and reciprocal) passion for a husband to whom she has remained "faithful" even if they have "grown apart" (Coetzee 2023, 11), is consequently baffled by the "aridity" (3; see also 75 and 84) of Witold, for whom love is "not the province of extreme emotions" (Teo 2021, 468). By contrast, and although the narrator points out that such an idea is probably as "outdated" as it is "sentimental," Beatriz expects "[t]o be transported, to be lost in transports" (Coetzee 2023, 14), through music and love alike –but Witold sees her, above all, as "a symbol of peace" (31; see also 32, 33, 37, 40, 41, 42, 68, 69, 80). In this sense, Witold seems to descend from a "medieval and Petrarchan," i.e. pre-Romantic "tradition of the male lover" (Teo 2021, 463), one that involves "the male idealisation of the female figure" (López 2019, 167) and need not imply any hope of reciprocity: "[i]n the Middle Ages, there was little expectation that romantic love would be requited" (457), even though it could be.[4] For example, when Beatriz asks him why he thinks his "musical hero" (Coetzee 2023, 20) lives on, he answers, along similar lines, that it is "[b]ecause he tells us about ourselves. About our desires. [...] Which are sometimes desires for that which we cannot have. That which is beyond us" (22). Like the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who "loved [his near-homonymous muse Beatrice] all his life" although she "never gave him one word" (31), Witold assures Beatriz that he would be satisfied with what others may regard as very little:

> An ordinary life side by side –that is what I want. For always. The next life too, if there is another life. But if not, okay, I accept. If you say no, not for the rest of life, just for this week– okay, I accept that too. For just a day even. For just a minute. A minute is enough. What is time? Time is nothing. We have our memory. In memory there is no time. I will hold you in my memory. And you, maybe you will remember me too. (63)

[4] Hsu-Ming Teo hints at an "ideology of romantic love ... called *fin' amors*," which grew in medieval France –but may also have "Hispano-Arabic roots"– "in response to the sexually repressive dictates emerging from the Catholic Gregorian reforms that began in the middle of the eleventh century" (2021, 455). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, "the troubadours employed at various French courts ... and the aristocratic elite they served developed an alternative, sacred vision of love that mastered and purified sexual desire": "true love" was "conceptualized ... as a sacred, pure plane of love that was spiritual in its effect" (Teo 2021, 455; see also 467). Building on these ideas and on cultural historian William M. Reddy's insights, Eric Murphy Selinger and Laura Vivanco further maintain that the tradition of *fin' amors* (or *fin 'amor*) had both major literary consequences in twelfth-century France, where it "was not simply concurrent with the rise of the heroic romance as a literary genre ... but a crucial factor contributing to the popularity of this genre," and an "afterlife ... in modern romantic love culture" (2021, 489) since "the twelfth century's positive vision of sexual partnerships," which "was something entirely new in Western literature," has been "constantly with us ever since" (Reddy 41, qtd Murphy Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 489).

Beatriz is also troubled by "the question of physical appearance" (135), to which "modern lovers recognize the romantic attraction" (Teo 2021, 463) that is supposed to spark mutual passion. Here, she is clearly put off by the "cadaverous" (Coetzee 2023, 20), "ugly old male body" which is all that Witold "could bring to the table of love" (135). When "[s]he thinks of how it would be to share a bed with that huge bony frame, [she] shivers with distaste" (42) –a physical, age-related "reluctance on her part" (86) that will persist throughout her relationship with Witold, preventing her (during his lifetime, at least) from fully opening up to him, or to forms of love hitherto unknown to her.

Several textual cues nevertheless enable the reader to hypothesise that Beatriz's insensitivity to Witold's non-Romantic modes of expression (be they linguistic, musical or even physical) may make her, temporarily, deaf to potentially deeper desires, as well as to brands of love that would exceed her narrowly R/romantic conception. Like many contemporary heroines, on the perspectives, emotions, needs and experiences of whom romance novels have tended to focus (see Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 1, 2; Teo 2021, 462), Beatriz may not properly "understand what love is" and may thus "fail to recognize or interpret [her] own feelings correctly" (Teo 2021, 469). It may also be the case that Beatriz is actively, though quite confusedly, resisting her own idealisation by Witold –a status that makes her unconfortable. Intriguingly, "the prevalence of the idealisation of women as muses and saviours" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 2) in Coetzee's work can be traced back to Western literary traditions (e.g. medieval courtly texts like Dante's or the chivalric romances that Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, one of Coetzee's recurring intertexts, parodies –see López 2019, 166 and 176) that predate Romanticism, to which they offer alternative models. As much as Beatriz's romantic expectations are literarily mediated, i.e. shaped by Romanticism and its logic of passionate excess (rather than visibly conditioned by Romantic readings), she is also a literarily determined figure for Witold, a Dante-inspired figment of this quixotic character's imagination. In any case, despite her conviction that she is "deeply" –though exclusively– "curious ... [a]bout herself" (Coetzee 2023, 27), she often appears as "a mystery to herself" (LeClair 2023) and/or a living paradox to the reader. For instance, the question of "why her mind keeps going back to the Pole" is like a puzzle no existing science seems able to solve: "[i]t is a matter of missing things, and for missing things there seems to be, as yet, no ology. Mysterology? Mysterics?" (Coetzee 2023, 45). The fact nonetheless remains that Beatriz is somehow "compelled by whatever inarticulate magnetism now attracts them" (Eberlee 2023), and the reader is often brought to observe this unfathomable compulsion, which causes a frequent gap between her rational thinking and subsequent actions that clearly conflict with previous intentions or decisions but may reflect deeper, perhaps unconscious, desires. On a couple of occasions, the third-person narrator's account suggests that she is a highly unreliable character, so much so that *The Pole* has been described as "a cascade of unreliability told through Beatriz's point of view" (LeClair 2023). To give but a few examples: although she turns down Witold's invitation to join him in Girona for a second encounter because she is "too busy" (Coetzee 2023, 25), she ends up meeting him there shortly afterwards. Likewise, while "she has no intention of sleeping with him

in Sóller" (53), she spends several nights with him in her husband's Mallorcan house after the latter's departure. Even though "[t]here is a moment on the second night when out of the past there re-emerges the delicious feeling of falling," combined with the impression that Witold succeeded in "drawing music out of her" (85), she comes to the conclusion that she gave herself to him out of "pity" rather than passion and that "[o]ne should not go to bed with a man whom one does not desire" (86), as a result of which she brutally breaks up with him. Described as a way of "sav[ing] herself ... from the stigma of the too easily attainable" (90), this break-up, too, aligns with an ideal of romantic (if not strictly Romantic) love that is "peculiar to Western society" (Teo 2021, 455), since "[t]he one fundamental idea about romantic love in European-derived cultures is that love –especially 'true love'– is different from, and superior to, lust or sexual desire even though it incorporates desire" (454). In this case, love is deemed unable to incorporate desire or to transcend "the physical appetites of the body" (454) –and discarded on this account. Most importantly, confirming an early prolepsis whereby the narrator warns the reader that "[i]t would take [her] a while to overcome [her] first, instinctive response ... and to see the Pole in his full selfhood" (Coetzee 2023, 13), Beatriz firmly holds on to her belief in "the powers of forgetting" –as opposed, again, to Witold's "trust in [those] of memory" (63)– and, as a consequence, completely underestimates the imprint he has left in her.

In the days that follow their Sóller encounter, she "look[s] into her heart" but "can find no dark residue: no regret, no sorrow, no longing—nothing to trouble the future" (89). Yet, after her return to Barcelona, she is still "in a state of mild shock," and "[i]t surprises her that what occurred in Mallorca can have an effect so long-lasting, like a bomb that explodes harmlessly but leaves one deafened" (91). Until she receives a call from Witold's daughter, Ewa Reichert, in October 2019 (i.e. four years after their relationship), she feels "[s]he does not miss him, not at all. He writes to her. She deletes his letters without reading them" (91): "[t]he truth is that by the time the daughter phoned her to announce his death she had all but forgotten him, or at least moved him into the no-longer-active bin" (132). Upon learning that Witold left something for her, to be retrieved in his apartment in the outskirts of Warsaw, she is still more than reluctant to revisit a past that risks obscuring her future and recognise that she was unhinged by that relationship:

> The future lies open before her and the Pole is trying to draw her back. From the grave he stretches out a claw to drag her into the past. Well, she does not have to submit. She can shrug off the claw. ... To the man in the grave she can say, *You have no power over me. You are dead. Being dead may be a new experience for you but you will get used to it. It is a not uncommon fate to find oneself dead and forgotten*. (96, italics in original)

In Witold's apartment, which she finds empty except for a piano, a plaster bust of Johann Sebastian Bach, photographs of Witold and herself, an urn containing his ashen remains and some boxes (100), a shift nevertheless occurs when she discovers Witold's postmortem literary legacy: she starts "warming to the Pole, now that she has his testament in her hands" (104) –a manuscript consisting in a collection of

"poems, in Polish, one to a page, typewritten and numbered I to LXXXIV" (102). Tellingly, during the solitary night she spends there, "she wakes briefly, sensing someone else in the apartment" (106), as if the "abode" was "still haunted ... by the ghost of its master" (124). This spectral presence appears to literalise a trace that has not been properly registered before, though one that will no longer leave Beatriz: back in Barcelona, where she is considering having the manuscript translated into Spanish, "the poems refuse to be forgotten"; instead, "[t]hey burn with a slow fire" (120) in the bottom drawer of her desk, like the discreet but stubborn reminders of a seemingly harmless yet deafening bomb (see *supra* and 91) whose explosion prevents the poems, as well as the whole episode, from receding into history.

6. OPENING UP INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE WITH A PRE-ROMANTIC CLASSIC OF EUROPEAN ROMANCE: *LA VITA NUOVA*, BY DANTE ALIGHIERI

During the lecture Coetzee delivered on 13 October 2025 at De Munt / La Monnaie (Brussels) on the occasion of his VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)-awarded Honorary Doctorate, he made the following statement: "[t]he writer with the crude vocabulary that language provides to deal with our emotional life –joy, sorrow, love, hate, anger, fear– is easily eclipsed by the musician with an infinite tonal range at his fingertips to explore nuances of feeling" (Coetzee 2025). In *The Pole*, although Witold had explicitly warned Beatriz that he did "not have the words ..., in English ... or in any language" (Coetzee 2023, 61), he still goes so far as to "g[i]ve up music" (140), his primary medium with its infinitely varied emotional nuances, in order to adopt "an art that he was not master of" (136) and produce "a book of Beatrice" (103), in the name of his love for Beatriz but also –arguably– in (hopeless) response to the latter's unfulfilled romantic expectations, deriving from a limiting conception of love as excess inherited from Romanticism. While Beatriz is allegedly uninterested in the art of "[f]lirting" (7) and accuses Witold, after his death, of having "had the whole creaking edifice of romantic love behind [him]" (145), she is the one who, at the end of the narrative, admits that she "would have liked to be seduced" and regrets that Witold "never actually wooed [her]" (139). In brief, she is the one who expects "theatrics" (140) –a term that can be construed as referring to the intensity and depth of feeling which have come to typify the Romantic era, conveyed as they are, sometimes in simplistic or stereotyped forms, through narrowly Romantic music, namely that of what Beatriz calls "the real Chopin performers" (Coetzee 140), and, above all, language, especially the language of love bequeathed by Romantic literature.

With this "book of Beatrice, put together by an obscure follower of Dante" (103), Coetzee engages in conversation with Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova*, which forms part of *The Pole*'s intertextual framework and with which it features similarities, as well as differences. *La Vita Nuova*, a 43-chapter autobiographical account in which Dante celebrates –in old Italian– his "lifelong love" (Wilson 2023) Beatrice, is comprised of rhymed poems (such as sonnets, ballads, canzoni, etc.) that are interspersed with prose passages. As a matter of fact, Dante's poetry and prose

hark back to different time-periods in the poet's life. While most of the poems were composed during Beatrice's short lifetime, the book as a whole was penned after her 1290 death (most probably in 1291 or 1292, and by all means before 1300), which involved not only adding, in retrospect, some explanatory prose, but also reworking (even eliminating in certain cases –see Durand Fardel 1898, 137), *a posteriori* (see 17, 118, 123, 140), a number of poems.[5] In *The Pole*, Witold's poems in Polish are comparably interpolated with "extra-poetic" (Coetzee 2023, 144) "handwritten bits" (131). Although the reader is provided with little information in this regard –except that in the second-last poem, Witold asks "'[his] Beatrice'," in English, to "'save [him]'" (144), it can be assumed that the entire text, unlike Dante's, was composed from memory, i.e. after Beatriz's symbolic death or complete disappearance from Witold's life. As Jennifer Wilson (2023) recalls, *La Vita Nuova* is "a classic text of courtly love," in which "Dante describes how, in keeping with that tradition, he masks the fact that Beatrice is the object of his love by addressing [directly, i.e. in the second person] other women, called "'screen ladies.'" In Witold's text, it is, funnily, Dante's Beatrice who acts as a 'screen lady', thus obscuring the fact that Beatriz is, in truth, the object of his love: as Poem 2 suggests, "secretly it was the farther one he was devouring" (Coetzee 2023, 146). The variation in spelling (Beatrice / Beatriz) is so subtle that its fools another 'screen lady', namely the translator of Witold's manuscript into Spanish, into informing Beatriz that the character of "Beatrice ... is not [her]. That is the girlfriend of the poet Dante" (116). The screen as trope, applied to translation, might be read as Coetzee's way of drawing the reader's attention to the potential limitations of translational practice and the existence of linguistic "subtleties ... that no translation can ever transmit" (131), all the more so since, in this case, Clara Weisz Urizza –a woman "who speaks rapid Castilian with an Italian accent"– is not a professional "literary translator" (112) but "normally ... translate[s] legal documents" (113).

The main similarity between Dante's and Witold's texts is, however, that both are, at the same time, "a record of love" and an act of "mourning" (132). Firstly, although Beatriz initially feared that Witold might choose to narrativise their relationship into "a story ... about a cruel Spanish mistress who left a scar on his heart that will take a long time to heal" (90) –a scenario that is hardly compatible with her vanity, eager as she is to preserve her self-image and respectability, the poems, far from being "an act of revenge" (132), eventually make clear that Witold, just like Dante perhaps, "wanted not merely to *say* that he loved her" (120, italics in original), let alone by relying on "the flattering lies men tell the women they want to sleep with" (139), "but to prove it—prove it by performing for her sake a lengthy and inherently meaningless task" (120). Secondly, as is the case, too, in many Romantic (i.e. mid- to late nineteenth-century) narratives, the protagonists are parted by death

[5] This is attested by Dante's use of certain figures of speech, such as prolepses in Chapters XIV and XXIII, which seem to foreshadow Beatrice's death at a time when the poet could have had no real foreboding of her tragically precocious passing (see 49, 68, 122).

(see Teo 2021, 465), even if Dante's and Witold's texts respectively respond to a real death and a symbolic one. It is worth noting that Dante's poetry is typical of the so-called *dolce stil nuovo*: in this type of poetry, melancholy often casts a shadow on love, which then feels haunted by death (see Durand Fardel 1898, 128). In *The Pole*, the reader is presented with the likely hypothesis that "through his poems, [Witold] aspires to speak to [Beatriz] from beyond the grave": "like a mother who refuses to give up a dead child" (Coetzee 2023, 120), Witold –just as his medieval alter ego– has "nurse[d] his loss" and striven to make it "bearable" by "invoking, creating, calling into being a *new* Beatriz" (133, italics in original). The phrase *vita nuova* can, therefore, be understood in at least three distinct ways. In an attempt to come to terms with their grief after the brutal disappearance of their beloved, both Witold and Dante started a new life, just as their gracious ladies entered a second life (in a hypothetical afterworld, in the case of Beatrice); these beloved but lost ladies were then written into existence, as Dante explicitly mentions in Chapter XXXII and as Witold's Poem 20 spells out: "Always there is a new time / a new life / *una vita nuova*" (142; italics in original).

7. THE UNEXPECTEDLY TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF WITOLD'S UNROMANTIC LOVE ON BEATRIZ

By the end of the narrative, the translation (or mistranslation) of Witold's full poetic testament leads Beatriz to conclude that he was "not a great poet" (140). Although "he published a book of verse" in the 1960s –"a *publikacja ulotna*," i.e. "a fleeting ... or fugitive publication" (130, italics in original), he did not consider himself, as Beatriz was informed from the outset, "inspired" or "clever with words" (81). Finally, Beatriz comes to realise that despite a physical likeness to the Italian master (see 104), his Polish disciple "may not be Dante" (143) –as Witold had also previously warned her (see 81)– but that his poems still "mean a great deal to [her]" (143). While she may be disappointed that Witold was "a man who lack[ed] the art that quickens the word" (137), not least because "[n]o one is going to want to read about [his] love for [her]," she also claims that she "never asked to be written about" [140] by anyone. Even so, she is finally able to recognise that she "was fond of [him]" (144) and move beyond his "bad poetry" (136) to accept him as he was. In the concluding pages of *The Pole*, the previous depiction of Witold as "*[a] spectre from the past*" (55, italics in original) thus gains its full significance, in the sense that it comes to refer not only to Witold as "a relic of history" (90) –in his own words: "I am the old generation. I am history. I should be in a museum, in a glass cabinet" (72)– but also to the fact that he rises from both his grave and Beatriz's past, not just as a ghost-like presence but as the provider of a concrete literary legacy, to transform her present and hopefully broaden, through writing, her Romantic, and rather cramped, conception of love. In this sense, Witold's seemingly obsolete, resolutely un-Romantic approach to love leaves an unexpectedly yet deeply transformative trace

on his beloved; and even if his death precludes the kind of happy ending or HEA[6] that is conventionally expected in romance novels, including contemporary ones, *The Pole* still ends quite optimistically, with Beatriz thanking Witold, calling him her "prince" (147) and even gesturing towards "futurity" (Murphy, Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 501) through the final postscript: "I will write again" (147).

8. RENEWING THE ROMANTIC GENRE THROUGH "FLAT AFFECT"

As we have seen, *The Pole* is "at its heart a novel about language," in more ways than one: beyond being "a love story that unfolds across a language barrier" (Wilson 2023), it tackles the respective importance of "dominant" and "non-dominant" languages and literatures at the global level (taking issue with the hegemony of English and, more directly, with the power structures that may result –even within Europe– in the inferiorisation or invisibilisation of supposedly "minor" languages and literatures, like the Polish ones), questions the specific linguistic asymmetries in one of Coetzee's "relations of inequality" (Liu 2023) –that of Beatriz and Witold– and highlights the potentially transformative effects, even in (mis)translation, of superior forms of language like poetry (be it in relatively "bad" (Coetzee 2023, 136) varieties). Additionally, Coetzee seeks to challenge the linguistic legacy of what is commonly understood as Romanticism, particularly in romance narratives –an issue that is both thematised and textualised in *The Pole*, which could accordingly be labelled "meta-R/romantic" (see Teo 2021, 472). The latter term is productive on two counts, as it suggests, on the one hand, that *The Pole* somewhat obliquely yet critically comments on various aspects –including the linguistic one– of the Romantic inheritance (see Section 5, where Coetzee's conceivable engagement with a contemporary propensity for associating, sometimes mistakenly, Romanticism with exceedingly intense affects, is discussed) and, on the other hand, that the text itself, through its author's very language, encapsulates a response to this critique. At the thematic level, the character of Beatriz indeed allows Coetzee to assess the implications of expectations based on the "Romantic" language of excessive emotions for, and more broadly the often overly important part played by language in, romantic relationships. In textual terms, Coetzee is shown to resist the emotionally stereotypical excesses of Romantic language through the formal economy of means that signs "his trademark clarity" (Wilson 2023). With its "signature sparseness" (Wilson 2023) and "reserved" (Demneri 2023) –not to say "austere" (Wilson 2023)– writing style, *The Pole* has been described as "Coetzee's most pared-down novel to date" (Liu 2023). In terms of the text's "gestural" structure, the first five of the narrative's six "[i]ndividual sections ... are further broken up into subsections, clearly delineated by numbers—a ... choice which itself lends a sense of preordainment or organized inevitability to the

[6] An abbreviation that stands for "happy/-ily ever after" in dedicated scholarship (see Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 4; Murphy Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 489-490, 501).

progression of events" (Eberlee 2023). *The Pole* is thus "unconventional" (Demneri 2023) insofar as the austerity of the writing –which echoes Witold's playing style, thereby strengthening the idea that the latter might be a stand-in for Coetzee– and the mathematically ordered subsections, which seem incompatible with a literary project involving the depiction of possibly intense emotions, break both stylistically and structurally with what is traditionally expected from romance novels and romantic narratives in general. Moreover, this sense of dryness, which may hold the reader at bay (as opposed to the R/romantic sentiments one may feel carried away by), is reinforced by the metafictional comments the text is occasionally interwoven with. Through these comments, Coetzee develops a narrative mode favouring what Lauren Berlant has called "flat affect," namely a form of "affective minimalism" (Zarranz & Ledoux-Beaugrand 2017, 16) characterised by an "underperformance of emotion" (Duschinsky & Wilson 2015, 185). The opening pages of *The Pole*, for instance, display a third-person narrator self-reflexively (and rather straightforwardly) interrogating his own fictional practice and wondering how to portray –or at least "channel" (Kirkus 2023)– his protagonists, and what to do with them:

> 1. The woman is the first to give him trouble, followed soon afterwards by the man. 2. At the beginning he has a perfectly clear idea of who the woman is. ... 3. The man is more troublesome. In concept, again, he is perfectly clear. ... 4. Where do they come from, the tall Polish pianist and the elegant woman ...? All year they have been knocking at the door, wanting to be let in or else dismissed and laid to rest. Now, at last, has their time come? (Coetzee 2023, 2-4)

In Part Two, the beginning of the ninth section is similarly underperformative:

> 9. They go for a walk on a tree-lined path along the riverside. It is a pleasant autumn day. *The leaves are turning, et cetera*. (30, italics added)

Refusing as it does to provide a detailed description of a natural environment generally regarded as conducive to the development of a romantic relationship, the excerpt points to a possible exhaustion of the realist genre Coetzee himself is not facing for the first time but is pithily illustrating, here (see italicised terms in particular), with the help of "playful" yet "critically self-aware metafictional gestures" (Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 16).

9. CONCLUSION

Crucially, this mode of "underperformed emotion" (Berlant 2015, 193) enables Coetzee to depart from the modern conventions of romantic narratives and, by extension, to call the Western ideal of romantic love, on which these narratives are based, into question as a cultural construct. As previously submitted, romantic love is a historically constituted –and thus also mutable– concept that has been fashioned by our reading of Romantic literature's influential classics. In *The Pole*, Coetzee brings our romantic expectations into dialogue –overtly or more implicitly– with major cultural

Romantic legacies, be they musical, literary or linguistic. Inasmuch as our aspirations for emotional excess remain shaped, as he subtly demonstrates, by the contemporary –and potentially reductive– understanding of Romanticism, he endeavours to widen our understanding of romantic love by emphasising the unexpectedly transformative effects of non-Romantic love. The romantic heroine's inner transformation is, in this case, intimately bound up with a shift in narrative perspective. As in other fictions by Coetzee, "narration ... is not gender-neutral" (Boehmer 2019, 241): in the first five sections of *The Pole*, Beatriz's femininity is performed by a third-person narrator, who seems to have access to her female interiority; although the use of the pronoun *him* in the text's opening line (see first displayed quotation in Section 8) makes it clear from the outset that "a woman" is "enacted by a man" (Dooley 2019, 30), and thus that female otherness is "ethically inhabited," this type of narration remains "an expression of the masculine consciousness that governs the work" (Boehmer 2019, 241) up to this point. It is, therefore, not surprising that she resists her own idealisation –an outcome of male fantasies– and remains fairly insensitive to Witold's otherness. In this part of the narrative, each protagonist is, in fact, the product of the other's romantic expectations, to which they refuse, or are simply unable, to conform: such "a projection of oneself onto another being" can only boil down to "a reduction of the otherness of the other" (Attridge 2019, 49) and, consequently, to an unsatisfactory relationship. In the sixth and last section of the text, however, Beatriz gains a degree of agency and control of her own voice. Even though she remains a muse, one that ironically elicits "bad" art, instead of entering the realm of proper creation, she is finally given a chance to narrate herself in the first person and, as a corollary, tentatively opens up to Witold's alterity. In *The Pole*, then, two competing, and hardly compatible, models of romantic love –Romantic *vs* courtly– are presented to the reader and respectively associated with female and male subjectivities: that the former emerges as less valid than the latter may at least partly result from the fact that it is more likely to incite the male sexual violence (see Giles 2019) some Western artistic traditions (including literary Romanticism, with its logic of passion and excess) contributed to legitimising by aestheticising it, even if they did not willingly seek to do so. All in all, *The Pole*'s narrative progression, without entirely erasing the power imbalances between the main characters, partly bridges the gap that separated them when they were both alive. As a mere muse, Beatriz does not transcend her status as "subordinate patriarchal subject" (Wright 2019, 23). Without achieving full artistic credibility, Witold posthumously sparks Beatriz's tenderness and interest as a man and poet. While Beatriz, the surviving protagonist, does not fulfill the impossible task of fully penetrating the otherness of the late Witold, she does take a step towards "overcoming [her] own too fixed ideas" (Attridge 2019, 47) regarding both the deceased other and R/romantic love itself. As for the self-reflexive, or meta-R/romantic, strategy of revision that registers traces of Coetzee's vast and ambitious questioning, it arguably allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

Reviews sent to the author: 09/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 24/07/2026

WORKS CITED

Alighieri, Dante. 1898. *La Vie nouvelle*. Trans. & ed. Max Durand Fardel.

Alighieri, Dante. 2021. *La Vita Nuova: Love Poems*. Pan Macmillan.

Attridge, Derek. 2019. "Molly Bloom and Elizabeth Costello: Coetzee's Female Characters and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew, & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Berlant, Lauren. 2015. "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*." *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 28(3) – Special Issue "Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant": 191-213.

Betzer, Joséphine. 2026. "Non, 'Les Hauts de Hurlevent' n'est pas une romance!" France Culture (January 29). Accessed 5 February 2026. https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/non-les-hauts-de-hurlevent-n-est-pas-une-romance-2306480.

Boehmer, Elleke. 2019. "On Beyond the Representational Binary: Coetzee (and the Women) Take Wing." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew, & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Coetzee, J. M. 1991. "What Is a Classic? A Lecture." Ch. 1 in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*. Secker & Warburg.

Coetzee, J. M. 2002. *Youth*. Viking.

Coetzee, J. M. 2004. *Elizabeth Costello*. Vintage.

Coetzee, J. M. 2023. *The Pole and Other Stories*. Harvill Secker.

Coetzee, J. M. October 13 2025. VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) Honorary Doctorate: La Monnaie / De Munt Lecture. Brussels. Personal notes.

Coetzee, J. M., & Mariana Dimópulos. 2025. *Speaking in Tongues*. Harvill Secker.

Demneri, Erlisa. 2023. "'The Pole' Review: Two Troubled Hearts in a Constant Tug-of-War." *The Harvard Crimson* (October 12). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/12/the-pole-j-m-coetzee-book-review/.

Dooley, Gillian. 2019. "J. M. Coetzee and the Women of the Canon." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew, & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Duschinsky, Robbie, & Emma Wilson. 2015. "Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28: 179-190.

Eberlee, Ellie. 2023. "Polonaise-Fantaisie: Desiring the Divine in 'The Pole.'" *Chicago Review of Books* (October 2). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://chireviewofbooks.com/2023/10/02/the-pole/.

Fox-Martens, Ella. 2023. "Lost in Translation: On J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole*." *The Drift* 11 (November 8). Accessed 8 January 2026. https://www.thedriftmag.com/lost-in-translation.

García Zarranz, Libe, & Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand. 2017. "Affective Assemblages: Entanglements and Ruptures –An Interview with Lauren Berlant." *Atlantis* 38(2): 12-17. www.msvu.ca/atlantis.

Giles, Jana M. 2019. "'Beauty Does Not Own Itself': Coetzee's Feminist Critique of Platonic & Kantian Aesthetics." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Harbour, Berna González. 2022. "J. M. Coetzee: 'After many years of practice, I write good English sentences.'" *EL PAÍS English* (September 13).

Ho Sze-Hwei, Grace. 2012. "Changing Chopin: Posthumous Variants and Performance Approaches." Unpublished thesis. U of Birmingham.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 2021. Introduction. In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge.

Kirkus Reviews. 2023. "Coetzee seems to be having some compassionate fun, and so will the reader." (September 19). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jm-coetzee/the-pole.

Kossew, Sue. 1993. "Women's Words: A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's Women Narrators." *SPAN: Journal for the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 37: 12-23. Republished in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Sue Kossew, G.K. Hall, 1996, 166-179.

Kossew, Sue, & Melinda Harvey. 2019. "J. M. Coetzee and the Woman Question." In *Reading Coetzee's Women.*Palgrave Macmillan.

Kusek, Robert. 2023. "From the Heart of the Country to the European Core: J. M. Coetzee and *los polacos*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10(3): 267-286.

LeClair, Tom. 2023. Review of *The Pole*, by J. M. Coetzee. *Open Letters Review* (September 19). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://openlettersreview.com/posts/the-pole-by-jm-coetzee.

Liu, Jasmine. 2023. "A Saving Skepticism: On J. M. Coetzee's 'The Pole.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books* (*LARB*) (October 30). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-saving-skepticism-on-j-m-coetzees-the-pole/.

López, María J. 2019. "'God Knows Whether There Is a Dulcinea in This World or Not': Idealised Passion and Undecidable Desire in J. M. Coetzee." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Murphy Selinger, Eric & Laura Vivanco. 2021. "Romance and/as Religion." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo, 485-510. Routledge.

Parry, Benita. 1996. "Speech and Silence in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." In *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan, & Stephen Watson. Palgrave Macmillan.

Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona. 2002. "J. M. Coetzee: Writing with/out Authority." *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 7(1): 1-12.

Reddy, William M. 2012. *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. U of Chicago P.

Stewart, Paul. 2019. "Art and the Female in *Youth*: Between Joyce and Beckett." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew, & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2021. "Love and Romance Novels." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Weisser, Susan Ostrov. 2013. *The Glass Slipper: Women and Love Stories*. Rutgers UP.

Wilson, Jennifer. 2023. "In Other Words: J. M. Coetzee's Interlingual Romance." *The New Yorker* (September 25 [online edition] /October 2 [print edition]). Accessed 3 March 2025. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/23/10/01/the-pole-j-m-coetzee-book-review.

Wright, Laura. 2008. "Displacing the Voice: South African Feminism and J. M. Coetzee's Female Narrators." *African Studies* 67(1): 11-32.

Wright, Laura, 2019. "He and His Woman: Passing Performances and Coetzee's Dialogic Drag." In *Reading Coetzee's Women*, ed. Sue Kossew & Melinda Harvey. Palgrave Macmillan.

LOVE, FOOD AND SOVEREIGNTY: INDIGENOUS ROMANCE AND RELATIONALITY IN TASHIA HART'S *NATIVE LOVE JAMS*[*]

Silvia Martínez Falquina
University of Zaragoza

Abstract

This article analyzes Red Lake Nation of Anishinaabe author Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* as a relevant intervention in both Indigenous literature and the popular romance genre. The article argues that Hart reclaims the genre as a space of representational sovereignty. The novel departs from damage-centered narratives grounded in trauma and loss, and foregrounds joy, sensuality and erotic pleasure as central Indigenous experiences in the present. It thus redefines love as not merely individual but inherently relational, expanding it to encompass self-love, community care, and sustaining connection to the natural world. Food plays a central role in the novel, for it organizes desire and relation to place, thus aligning affective sovereignty with food sovereignty. By conversing with and responding to the romance conventions, the novel challenges its foundations as it vindicates Indigenous relational epistemologies to assert and promote survivance and belonging.

Keywords: Indigenous Romance, Sovereignty, Food Sovereignty, Decolonial Erotics, Relationality.

AMOR, COMIDA Y SOBERANÍA: FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA INDÍGENA Y RELACIONALIDAD EN *NATIVE LOVE JAMS* DE TASHIA HART

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la novela *Native Love Jams* de la autora anishinaabe Tashia Hart (Red Lake Nation), por su relevancia en la literatura indígena contemporánea y en la narrativa romántica popular, argumentando que Hart reclama el género como espacio de soberanía representacional. La novela se aleja de narrativas centradas en el daño para destacar en su lugar el disfrute, la sensualidad y el placer erótico como experiencias centrales para las personas indígenas. Define de este modo el amor como experiencia no solo individual sino intrínsecamente relacional, que incluye también el amor por uno/a mismo/a, la relación con la comunidad y la conexión sostenible con el mundo natural. La comida ocupa un lugar central en la novela, organizando el deseo y la conexión con el lugar, y así el texto integra soberanía afectiva y soberanía alimentaria. Estableciendo un diálogo con las convenciones del romance, la novela subvierte sus fundamentos a la par que reivindica las epistemologías relacionales indígenas con el fin de afirmar y promover la supervivencia/resistencia y la pertenencia.

Palabras clave: Ficción romántica indígena, soberanía, soberanía alimentaria, erótica decolonial, relacionalidad.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.03
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 59-76; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Native Americans have traditionally been –and continue to be– the objects of settler colonial desire and appropriation, both materially and symbolically. The subsequent cannibalism has affected Indigenous bodies –murdered, raped, eroticized, exoticized, lands – stolen, extracted, polluted, and foodways –destroyed, consumed, commodified. In the face of this history of consumption, Indigenous sovereignty becomes a nourishing practice of survivance which restores agency and renews connection. This article explores Tashia Hart's romance novel *Native Love Jams* as one such form of reclamation on different levels: representative sovereignty through the re-appropriation of the romance genre; affective sovereignty through the affirmation of Indigenous desire; and food sovereignty through the reestablishment of reciprocal relations between people, plants, and place.

Hart is a member of the Red Lake Nation of Anishinaabe in northern Minnesota. She is a culinary ethnobotanist, artist, photographer, and cook, as well as writer. *Native Love Jams* was a 2024 Minnesota Book Awards Finalist in Genre Fiction, and the novel will soon be made into a romantic comedy movie (Colvin 2024). The second installment of Hart's "Real Native Romance" collection, entitled *Reservation Red Top*, and which she defines as "Native American Paranormal Romantic Comedy" on her website, is forthcoming in 2026. Hart is also the author of *Girl Unreserved* (2015), a fictionalized retelling of her own coming of age in Northern Minnesota, with references to mental health, sexual assault, poverty and the ripples of trauma; *Gidjie and the Wolves* (2020), a middle-grade illustrated book which won the Moonbeam Children's Book Award Gold Medal; and *The Good Berry Cookbook: Harvesting and Cooking Wild Rice and Other Wild Foods* (2021), which includes 75 recipes –some by other Indigenous cooks from various nations, as well as images and stories. She has recently co-produced, acted and helped develop the story for a forthcoming film by Jonathan Thunder –a Duluth artist and member of the Red Lake Nation– titled *Ish Meets a Mermaid* (Colvin 2025).

Native Love Jams is an example of the third wave of Indigenous writing, a term first used by Louise Erdrich to refer to the current "powerful time" in which many Native writers of diverse backgrounds, sensibilities, and languages are expanding Indigenous literature (in Orange 2020), and which I take to characterize a trend of recent Native American texts that engage traditional Indigenous forms and values– often associated with specific tribes and cultures –with Western genres such as romance, crime fiction, children's literature, YA fiction, comic, or fantasy. My main argument is that authors of this third wave assert representative sovereignty through a reworking of literary forms which we may not directly associate with

* Research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (project codes PID2021-124841NB-I00 and PID2023-149915NB-100), by the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER; EU), and the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H03_23R).

Indigenous creativity, and in doing so, they resist settler colonial expectations about Native American identity and expression. This is not only a very interesting literary development but also an overtly decolonial act.

Hart's novel was self-published in 2023. When interviewed, the author recounts how she created (Not) Too Far Removed Press in 2020, after one of her books met with rejection and criticism from publishers because its protagonist was, in their view, "too far removed" from what mainstream readers would identify with ("Tashia Hart" 2023). As she sets out to write and publish about real Indigenous people in the twenty-first century, Hart's motivation is thus decolonial –for, as Driskill argues, "[d]ecolonization is an act of imagining" that reclaims Indigenous lives, languages, and bodies (2016, 169), and creating an independent press to tell Indigenous stories on Indigenous terms is precisely such an act. Further vindicating Indigenous creative freedom, the novel incorporates words in Anishinaabemowin without translation, and it negotiates Indigenous and non-Indigenous themes and symbols. It focuses on cooking and foraging for wild foods, positing a balanced relation to the natural world. The text also aligns with body positivity and its naturalization –including but not limited to sexual desire– as it points to the affirmation of identity through the senses, and to the inseparable connection between mind, body, and environment. By challenging taboos and stereotypes, and making Indigenous desire and relationships visible, it offers a solid response to the male colonial gaze and the objectification of women and Indigenous peoples.

2. A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE FOR THE INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT

Native Love Jams integrates two of Hart's main motivations: food and love, both of which are central to her activism and her fiction. As she says, "I wanted to write a contemporary romance with the food sovereignty movement of Native America at its heart" (Friends 2024). For this purpose, Hart refers to her own experience: she is a food activist, she was mentored by Chef Sean Sherman (Oglala), who runs a well-known restaurant in Minneapolis, and she has compiled the "Indigenous Food Producers and Suppliers List." She has spoken of how food is related to empathy, self-love and acceptance, and she claims that wild foods provide emotional sustenance: "My identity is inseparable from the food I eat. Chokecherry syrup and mashkiigobagwaaboo (swamp tea) feel like home. They are markers of place, space, and time. ... Food and healing go hand in hand" (in Krishna 2019). Her stated inspiration for the novel came "from her own experiences traveling as an Indigenous Chef for food sovereignty summits and events" (in Colvin 2024). Taken together, these experiences position Hart within the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement, and they illuminate the ethical and political stakes of her representation of food and relationality in the novel.

The Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement is grounded on the idea that Native communities have the right to control their own food systems, including seeds, land, farming, hunting, fishing, and foodways. As Winona LaDuke defines

it, "[f]ood sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as Indigenous peoples, and a way, one of the most sure-footed ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us" (2019, xvi). These contemporary revitalization efforts are relevant insofar as they respond to and try to revert the consequences of food colonialism, or the systemic policies and material interventions that severed Indigenous peoples from their subsistence practices in order to undermine Indigenous self-determination (Mihesuah & Hoover 2019, 4). These include, but are not limited to, the disruption of traditional food systems, the deliberate use of food as a tool of cultural conversion and population control, the substitution of ancestral diets with government commodity foods such as flour, sugar, and lard, and the suppression of ceremonial and seasonal foodways. The effects of food trauma are structural and ongoing, which is why activists make a point of addressing them from a holistic perspective, focusing on responsibility and relationship. In Devon Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover's words,

> The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty is not focused only on *rights to* land, food, and the ability to control a production system, but also *responsibilities to* and culturally, ecologically, and spiritually appropriate *relationships with* elements of those systems. (2019, 11; italics in original)

As Mihesuah argues in *Recovering Our Ancestors' Gardens* (2020), revitalizing Indigenous foodways requires restoring the connections among land, ancestors, community, and health, all of which were fractured by colonial interventions. In her view, food is never merely sustenance but a means of cultural and political sovereignty which she exemplifies through renewed practices of gardening, harvesting, and education. The relational understanding of food is also underscored by Amelia Katanski, who demonstrates how Anishinaabe manoomin (wild rice) stories are a form of Indigenous knowledge, governance, and food sovereignty (2017, 77). If, as she states, "Anishinaabe storytellers and food activists are often one and the same" (86), then "[s]tory and action intertwine, and ricing becomes decolonized and decolonizing knowledge and process, which can never be separated from story" (86). In this way, telling stories that nourish becomes an act of survivance (87). Nieves Pascual reinforces this point by examining Indigenous foodways as decolonial acts of resilience; in her words, "culinary resilience emerges from standing up to the foods of the colonizer, and eliminating unhealthy ingredients that were introduced by Europeans" (2026). Through food –which can be recovered in imagination if not in pure form– Indigenous populations "actively refashion and revive their original cultures" (2026).

It is within the context of Indigenous food sovereignty that Hart writes *Native Love Jams*, and her choice of genre is also deliberate and political. To start with, romance novels by BIPOC authors in general, and by Native Americans in particular,

are significantly hard to find.[1] Apart from obstacles presented by the mainstream publishing industry, there has been logical resistance on the part of Indigenous authors to associating with American Indian romances, which are produced by and for white women and usually set in the past (Martínez-Falquina 2024). These texts insistently include exotic Native American characters who perpetuate colonial stereotypes and reinforce appropriation and misunderstandings of Indigenous cultures. Moreover, nonwhite characters tend to remain underrepresented or stereotyped in romance due to the fact that romantic love has been naturalized as a white experience, which derives –as authors like Erin Young (2020), Hsu-Ming Teo (2020) or Jayashree Kamblé (2023) have noted– in the historical whiteness of romance. As a consequence, "[p]opular romance ... has a race problem" (Young 2020, 742). This is precisely the colonial structure that works like *Native Love Jams* are set to counter by centering Indigenous desire.

In the context of Native American literature, romance novels by Indigenous authors are still rare, but something is changing, albeit slowly. An interesting example is Evangeline Parsons Yazzie's *Her Land, Her Love* series (2014-2019), a romantic historical tetralogy set during the Navajo Long Walk. Yazzie, informed by Navajo elders' stories, seeks to provide the Indigenous perspective on the traumatic episode and its effects, underscoring Navajo values and celebrating resilience. She admits that the love story provides an unusual viewpoint of a painful history, thus showing an awareness of the inherent complications of the narrative form that she has chosen.[2] In turn, Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams*, set in the 2020s, provides an example of what romance critics have identified as the diversification of romance narratives in recent years (Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2020), led by authors who "incorporate racial and cultural diversity to decentre hegemonic visions of love and to vindicate the 'happily ever after' for individuals, collectives or communities who have historically been excluded from the dominant romantic imperative" (Fresno-Calleja 2023, 3). Apart from the current moderate progress towards diversity in the genre at large, third-wave romance criticism, as defined by Teo (2018), emphasizes the political complexity of romance and the conversations it facilitates about themes like race, sexuality, gender, and power.[3] As Teo (2020) notes, romance is a contested cultural space in which questions of race, gender, and power are negotiated rather than merely

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer who brought to my attention the work of Chamorro writer Paula Quinene, the author of popular romances like *Conquered* and *Stormed*, whose fiction also engages with questions of food sovereignty and Indigenous survival. For an illuminating study of Chamorro romance fiction, see Carolina Fernández Rodríguez's "Chamorro WWII Romances: Combating Erasure with Tales of Survival and Vitality," which examines how writers such as Quinene reconfigure the romance genre through anti-colonial and culturally revitalizing strategies. As Fernández Rodríguez notes, Chamorro literature has often remained critically overlooked, since "US Literary Studies rarely devote any attention to the literature produced in the US Pacific territories, while Post-colonial Studies often fail to focus on countries that are yet to be decolonized" (2019: 1).

[2] For an analysis of Yazzie's work, see Hoorenman 2021 and Martínez-Falquina 2024.

[3] See Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2020; Teo 2020; Roach 2020; Young 2020; Fresno-Calleja 2023; and Kamblé 2023.

reflected. Besides, marginalized romances can transform the genre epistemologically (Kamblé 2023). Thus, I argue that romance is a meaningful site for decolonial and Indigenous intervention.

In this sense, *Native Love Jams* contributes to expanding the "range" of romance novels, to use Pamela Regis' term (2020), and thus counters the accusations that romance novels are formulaic and all the same. Yet, the novel does not merely work towards diversifying the genre's representational field, but it also revises its underlying assumptions about love and desire. In fact, it is an example of Catherine Roach's conception of "counter-narratives" (2020, 63), stories that do not reject romance but expand it, offering alternative ways of loving, desiring, and belonging, and in this way challenging the genre's historically exclusionary structures. The decolonial motivation of *Native Love Jams* is made manifest in its dialogue with romance conventions as it redefines them through Indigenous epistemologies which recenter land and community, and counter settler colonial logics. The novel also reframes love as relational rather than individualistic, confirming Teo's claim that although romance is founded on the separation of mind from body, this is not a universal split (2020, 660-662). In Hart's text, erotic desire is defined in relation to nature and the world, and it is never disconnected from spirituality.

Drawing on the genre's promise of an emotionally satisfying resolution, or Happily-Ever-After (HEA), Hart also reclaims what Roach identifies as the "equalising power" of the romance ending (2016, 176), and redeploys romance's "strong belief in the transformative and redemptive power of love" (176-77) in order to affirm Indigenous desire, based on a relational understanding of identity. Hart's stated intention with *Native Love Jams* –which she defines as a lighthearted sweet romance centered on the relation of humans to nature and food– was to bring some happy vibes to people's lives and help them feel good ("Tashia Hart" 2023). This focus on joy and well-being is one way in which she challenges extended expectations about Native Americans, and she is very aware of this motivation. In her words,

> I just wanted to write a story where we got to see ourselves have a happy ending like that is so important. Seeing yourself in the characters in this community, seeing your community in the community of Rainy Bay, and just feeling good. And feeling like, "Yeah, we're doing this, and we can have a happy ending too, because that's what that romance genre is all about." (qtd Colvin 2024)

This happy ending is directly connected to sovereignty: "Having joy, that's one of our greatest sovereignties. We're used to struggling, but like, we are also used to creating and telling our stories. And we need that" (qtd Colvin 2025). Thus, *Native Love Jams* mobilizes the reparative, future-generating possibilities of the romance to assert Indigenous presence and continuity.

This change of focus is relevant not only thematically but also epistemologically, for it contributes to replacing what Eve Tuck calls the "damage-centered approach" to Native American experiences and cultures, which is pathologizing insofar as it focuses on defining Indigenous communities by means of oppression and its consequences (2009, 413). Describing them as "only broken" reinforces stereotypes of depletion

and dispossession and this may benefit outsiders, but it does not ultimately benefit Indigenous peoples, who need a change of perspective to work for a better future for themselves. Tuck proposes as "an antidote to damage-centered research" (416) a desire-based framework which is "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (416). Desire, derived from the body but not confined to it (417), is a fundamental reorientation of how knowledge is and should be produced. This is not a simple reversal of damage and it certainly does not ignore suffering, for it accounts for "the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (417). Desire as an "epistemological shift" (419) recognizes Indigenous complexity and sovereignty as central, thus resisting stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as damaged and insisting instead on narratives of presence and survivance. Hence, as a contemporary romance for the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement, *Native Love Jams* responds to the need to turn Indigenous fiction toward articulating joy, desire, and relationality beyond damage-centered narratives. As this article is set to argue, Hart's intervention consists of her deliberate reworking of the conventions of popular romance to affirm Indigenous sovereignty.

3. CONVERSING WITH POPULAR ROMANCE

Native Love Jams alternates the perspectives of Winnow and Niigaanii, two Indigenous cooks in their thirties. Winnow has just broken her engagement with Chris, a self-absorbed, unfaithful and ill-willed Native man. We learn that Winnow is also frustrated by her failed attempt at starting a jam-making business when someone vandalized her kitchen a year before. She is headed towards Rainy Bay, a rural community in northern Minnesota, where she has been hired to work at Indigenous Food Days, a food festival. Niigaanii is a fellow employee of the event who has just been abandoned by her girlfriend Cindy. In the past, Niigaanii was framed for vandalism by Winnow's ex-fiancé, which landed him in jail, and he does not appreciate having to work with Winnow. Niigaanii is resentful because he thinks Winnow is still engaged to Chris. However, when they meet in person, they are attracted to each other straight away and, even more importantly, they soon become aware that they share a love of food and nature that makes them very compatible indeed.

Winnow is portrayed as a chef who is deeply connected to nature. She spends much of her time in the wilderness, "hiking through rough terrain and swarms of insects to find, converse with, and harvest plants" for both food and medicine (Hart 2023, 1). She is austere and pragmatic, as well as resourceful, and she learned "to get the most use out of a thing before repurposing, donating, or finally throwing it out" (2). She does not care too much about achieving a conventionally feminine appearance, and her personality is laced with a touch of humor and self-doubt, as she questions whether anyone would appreciate her "unkempt eyebrows, undusted cheeks, and mink-free eyelashes" (3). After her painful relationship with Chris, which left her feeling anxious and robbed her of laughter (14), she resorts to nature for solace

and empowerment, from her rituals with asemaa (tobacco) (56) to her emotional connection to water, which "makes her feel protected, calm, and loved" (59).

As for Niigaanii, he is a dedicated and community-oriented figure who manages the Rainy Bay Community Center and Hotel kitchen (Hart 2023, 4). He embraces his cultural heritage by championing food sovereignty through an innovative "Food Sovereignty in Action Vehicle," which he affectionately calls "The Harvester" (4). A man with a deep respect for the land, he engages in mindful acts like placing asemaa near plants and feeling their "delicate, floral aroma," which evokes cherished memories (20). He is humorous and playful, but he is also suffering as a consequence of the end of his previous relationship (12). This heartbreak has left him cautious but hopeful, as he is drawn to Winnow's groundedness and joy for life. Niigaanii's gentle nature is evident as he carefully helps a spider out of a window, an act of respect of nature that both moves and attracts Winnow (66).

In order to examine how the novel converses with and challenges the popular romance conventions, it is worth referring to the different elements through which Pamela Regis defined the genre in her influential *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003). These events shape the structure of the romance novel and reinforce the genre's focus on transformative love and personal growth. Regis starts with *society defined,* for, according to her, romance novels include an account of "the society that the heroine and the hero will confront in their courtship" (2003, 31). The novel represents a community that shares strong bonds with one another and with nature, especially through their relation to food and the environment. Thus, society does not symbolize restrictive norms or oppression, and the lovers do not need to confront it. The transformation of this narrative element points to the communal focus of Indigenous identity. As for *the meeting*, in Regis' account, the heroine and hero typically meet near the beginning of the narrative, and this encounter often hints at the upcoming conflict, setting the story's tension (2003, 32). In Hart's novel, the protagonists are immediately attracted to each other but the key difficulty comes from Winnow's ex Chris Brown, who does not accept that their relationship is over, and who, a year before the story time, vandalized his girlfriend's new business in order to prevent her from connecting with a chef they had both met. This chef is Niigaanii and he knows that Chris framed him, which makes him reluctant to approach Winnow, whom he believes is still Chris' fiancée. This is the next element, *the barrier*, which prevents the heroine and hero from uniting. Regis explains that "the romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier," which may be external (e.g., societal expectations, economic issues) or internal (e.g., personal beliefs or character flaws) (2003, 32). This barrier, crucial to the romance genre, serves to explore deeper themes within the heroine's life or psychology. In the novel, the barrier is used to explore both characters' thoughts and stance, not just the woman's, and it mostly consists of having their past experience determine their decisions about relationships.

Next comes *the attraction,* and according to Regis, a series of scenes establishes the reasons why the couple should be together, sustaining their connection long enough to "surmount the barrier" (2003, 33). In the novel, apart from significant sexual attraction on both sides, we bear witness to Winnow and Niigaanii's compatibility through their respective enjoyment of food foraging and preparation,

as well as their similar identification with the natural environment and its resources. Importantly, attraction is not only individual, for it includes –and to a large extent is based on– their connection to the land. *The declaration* is the scene where the hero and heroine declare their love for each other. The fact that this can occur at various points in the novel makes Regis argue that this variable placement "helps create the variety of plots" available within the genre (2003, 34). Declarations near the end, as is the case in this novel, mark the resolution of personal or relational conflicts. As for *the point of ritual death*, according to Regis this is a moment when the hoped-for union between the heroine and hero "seems absolutely impossible," reinforcing the stakes and emotional intensity of the story (2003, 35). In the novel, the most critical point for this relationship comes when Winnow sees Niigaanii get into Raquel's hotel room and thinks he is having sex with her. This is just a misunderstanding, but it makes Winnow question herself and recall the trauma of having Chris cheat on her. *The recognition* refers to "new information that will overcome the barrier" (Regis 2003, 36). It usually signifies a "self-revaluation" and understanding of the protagonist's "own psyche" (37). The recognition scene, therefore, is a turning point that brings the couple closer to their union. In the novel, this consists of Niigaanii finding out that Winnow has distanced herself from Chris, and of Winnow learning from Raquel that Niigaanii never showed any interest in her. They both learn that they can trust their own feelings and desires when assessing their mutual connection as true and safe. *The betrothal* represents the promise of a permanent union, usually through marriage or a comparable commitment. Regis notes that, by the end, "it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together," symbolizing a new, liberated state for the heroine (2003, 38). In this novel, both Winnow and Niigaanii are transformed insofar as they receive much needed positive feedback about their actions and ways of relating by finding a compatible partner in life. The society is not really transformed, although the couple will probably contribute to the community in the future with their plans to work together in the promotion of Indigenous food.

As for the three optional elements in Regis' definition, they include *wedding, dance or fete*, a celebration which "marks the creation of a new, inclusive society" around the couple's union (2003, 38). After some obstacles including a broken pipe that makes it difficult to feed all the visitors, the Indigenous Food Festival takes place successfully. Although we could take this as proof that, as Regis argues, "[s]ociety has reconstituted itself around the couple(s) and the community comes together to celebrate this" (38), the truth is that, in the novel, Indigenous society was never presented as requiring reconstitution. Instead, it is vindicated as fully functional, productive, and creative, countering all stereotypes of Natives who are much more than merely damaged. *Scapegoat exiled* refers to a character representing the "wrongheadedness" of old societal norms who is removed, symbolizing the rejection of values that hindered the romance (39). In the novel, Winnow's ex has to run away after being beaten by a female Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Chris is thus comically punished for his lack of respect for his partner in particular and women in general, and justice is served. Finally, *the ad converted* refers to an opposing character who is "converted to an acceptance" of the heroine and hero's union, emphasizing the power of love and the genre's theme of inclusion (39). In the novel, Raquel plays this

role. She likes Niigaanii and has set up a date with him, but she eventually accepts that he does not feel the same for her. In the end, Raquel befriends Winnow, who helps her reconnect with her mother after a fallout, and finds love somewhere else.

As we can see, Tashia Hart faithfully follows the classical romance novel structure defined by Regis. Yet, there are elements which point to specifically Indigenous vindications, like the equal focus on hero and heroine, or the assertion of the community as healthy and not in need of significant reconstruction. Both elements connect to the Native American emphasis on reciprocity between different elements of life, including men and women, people and nature, which contributes to the redefinition of Indigenous desire in the novel.

4. TALKING BACK: INDIGENIZING LOVE AND DESIRE

Although Hart engages with the popular romance form as described by Pamela Regis, she also responds to it by infusing it with Indigenous relationality and decolonial erotics. It is important to note that *Native Love Jams* does not simply represent Indigenous intimacy within a Western genre; it reappropriates this form to redefine love and desire through Indigenous epistemologies where body, land, and food are parts of an interdependent whole. Thus, the novel affirms what Mandy Suhr-Sytsma calls "the life-affirming power of Indigenous erotics" (2022, 312). She describes the erotic "as a site of power, pleasure, beauty, and creativity" which is "grounded in Indigenous epistemologies," including the relationships with land and water (312).[4] Moreover, similarly to the erotic experiences represented in Cynthia Leitich Smith's YA novel *Hearts Unbroken* –the focus of Suhr-Sytsma's analysis– the erotic experiences described in Hart's novel celebrate Indigenous joy and explore "desire's role in imagining and working towards decolonization" (313). This decolonial emphasis on desire also resonates with Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's reflections on Indigenous erotica as transformative. Akiwenzie-Damm insists that "the erotic is essential to us as human beings" and argues that it must reclaim "its rightful place in our lives and cultures before we could truly decolonize our hearts and minds" (2008, 113). In this view, the erotic is deeply reparative, becoming medicine "that would help to heal those broken and forgotten parts of who we are" (115), as well as antidote to colonial stereotypes and the pervasive violence that structure Indigenous women's lives, including the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women (115). Hence, the erotic is revolutionary, insofar as it reconnects contemporary Indigenous peoples with their bodies, stories, and ancestral knowledges, also pointing to the future. In Akiwenzie-Damm's words,

[4] See Suhr-Sytsma 2022 for an extensive, updated account of the presence of the erotic in a diversity of Indigenous literary texts.

> I have a dream that there is going to be a generation of our people, hopefully the next generation, who grows up with these positive images, these positive portrayals, these positive people who are comfortable in their own bodies, in their own sexuality and in loving other Indigenous people so that the erotic is simply an accepted, normal part of who they are. (123)

In *Native Love Jams*, the two protagonists have suffered from heartache and there are also references to past trauma in their lives. But the obvious focus of the novel falls on desire as joy and vitality with a touch of playfulness and a wink to resilience. Although there is alternating focalization and the two characters feel intense attraction for each other, which is detailed from both perspectives, the woman's desire is expressed more extensively and explicitly. Soon after meeting Niigaanii, Winnow enjoys the occasion to observe him freely before he even realizes she is there:

> She eyeballs the lobby before resuming the trace of the muscles flowing across his shoulders and down his chest. She stuffs the pamphlets into the holder upside down and backward, while her eyes lick him as if he were a flavor of Indigenous popsicle she never tasted the likes of. Her pupils pause to nibble at a softness atop his hips before lapping their way to his stomach, kissing at the soft brown skin that disappears into his red boxers. If only she could get close enough to reflect just her eyes in the silver of his buckle. (45)

Later, Niigaanii again becomes the object of Winnow's desire when he is cooking in the tribal kitchen:

> His apron is pulled snugly at his waist, accentuating the trapezoid of his torso. His t-shirt, although loose-fitting, can't conceal the muscular nature of his back and shoulders from her mind's eye, which stares in an unblinking stupor. There's the sound of rushing water, and he begins moving in a gyrating motion, his pelvis bumping on the steel counter in front of him in quick beats. Her pulse quickens, creating a bright hum in her skull that radiates out her eyes, making blurry her surroundings. (65)

In these and other descriptions, Winnow's sexual desire is presented openly and unapologetically. There is no shame whatsoever in this, or in her moments of solo erotic fantasy, like when she notices the phone vibrating "close to her nether regions" (55), or as she names the dildo her friend Melani has gifted her (76). Far from frivolous, desire is described as necessary as well as transformative, not just for Winnow but also for Niigaanii, who feels that "[e]lectricity surges from their touch and there's a promise of beautiful life in the spark" (136).

Humor plays a crucial role in how desire is articulated in the text. As Akiwenzie-Damm observes, "our erotica tends to be much more playful, humorous and joyful than other erotica," and she identifies humor as "one of the most obvious characteristics of Indigenous literary erotica" (2008, 120). Hart's novel exemplifies this playfulness by allowing erotic longing to coexist with a degree of awkwardness which by no means derives in anxiety. As an example, at a transcendental moment when Winnow feels "[i]t's like she's starting a second life" (57), she stretches and

"[a] boogit slips out" (57), followed by two young men laughing into their fists as Winnow tries to look dignified and innocent. This will derive in later jokes on the part of the young men, but the overall message is that the body is not idealized, and desire is part of ordinary, imperfect embodiment.

Apart from the affirmation of joyful desire in which Native peoples play a leading role, the most relevant cultural difference expressed in this Indigenous romance is the articulation of identity as inherently relational, which undermines both individualistic conceptions of the self and dualistic views of mind and body. Instead, we bear witness to how Indigenous peoples' connection to nature is deeply woven into their sense of identity, and their interactions with the landscape –especially centered on food in the case of *Native Love Jams*– are an expression of who they are. In the words of Akiwenzie-Damm,

> Indigenous erotic literature is often an attempt to reach out, to touch and, for a moment, to hold beauty aloft. Much of it is very firmly based in the natural world—it reflects and affirms our connections with other aspects of the natural world, such as animals, birds, plants, the land, the sky, the water, weather, the elements. In doing so it reminds us who we are and that we are intimately connected to all that surrounds us. (2008, 119)

In the novel, Winnow's life is shaped by her relationship with the wilderness, as she spends her days "hiking through rough terrain and swarms of insects" to gather plants that will nourish and heal her community (Hart 2023, 1). Swimming in the water with the encouragement of an eagle flying overhead (59), lying on a silky patch of moss surrounded by "a plethora of wild foods" (41), or marveling "at the bright-blue drink of space" that is the sky (98) are some of the examples of this transcendental connection to the land. Furthermore, such connection is deeply spiritual, as seen when she leaves a pinch of asemaa in nature, "saying a few words of love and care" for the community (56). For Winnow, nature is also a synonym of exploration similar to erotic desire:

> Winnow drops pins in the map on her phone for where things are growing in case the medicine is needed later. Her map is filled with enough pins that in certain parts of the state, she must zoom in to distinguish one location from another. Rainy Bay, which is north of the Twin Cities and east of Red Lake, however, has no such pins, and the idea of getting to explore the place excites her. (29)

Together, Winnow and Niigaanii encounter and deal with beings like leeches and woodticks naturally, and they are used to all beings that accompany them in their interactions with their surroundings. Observing how gently Niigaanii deals with a spider in the kitchen, explaining, "I take them from their homes, it's the least I can do," Winnow's "heart flutters like a memengwa [butterfly] set free from a jar" (66). Their connection to nature is precisely the main point of compatibility and attraction to each other. They both communicate with the natural world, which is where they can be truly themselves. As Winnow says, smiling, "[p]lants are some

of my favorite people" (83), and she shares with Niigaanii a past experience when she was out foraging:

> I was out picking ode'iminan [heart berries]. I was crouched down with my hands under the leaves. I spaced out for a few minutes until I felt a flow of energy like the kind plants often send out when they want to speak. I looked down and, in each hand, I was holding a strawberry. They were still attached to the plant, and together, the little green stems coming off the fruits formed a heart. I got a download of information, and they told me I would witness two hearts of a bigger love if I let my current relationship go. (102)

Her "self-contained contentedness with being alive in the moment" (81) as she is enjoying the wind on her face while riding his truck is something that Niigaanii finds really attractive, so that "[t]he heat of his loins combined with the warm wind on his face makes his mouth dry" (81). In fact, his own desire also makes him a creature of nature, so that "[h]e can't help but be attracted to the way she moves through the world; if his wood were a tree, it would be growing leaves and budding flowers right about now" (87). In turn, when Winnow smells his wet skin, "he's river stones and green manoomin [wild rice]. Excitement plumps her veins, causing certain parts of her to be aware of the distance to cross in order to reach him" (107). Not surprisingly, when they get closer, their dreams make them transcend their human forms too:

> Within moments of crossing the threshold from wake to dream, [Winnow] grows tall through the years, sees the forest change, feels the sway of the breeze, the hot of many summers' heat, the thrashing of storms, and then time settles on an early spring morning, and Niigaanii is caressing her bark. He produces his tap and gently presses it into her. He holds onto her trunk and laps at her sap, which trickles freely. Sounds of pleasure emanate from him as he quenches his thirst. (108)

In the end, as Winnow ponders, "[t]he best thing she found on the island wasn't physical food at all, but a growing, healthy desire for this man" (112).

As a particular element of nature, food becomes the most relevant extension of this relational identity, functioning not merely as sustenance but as a site of convergence of identity, nature, and community. The protagonists are both cooks who are active in the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement: Winnow is on a "gig to forage and cook for a wild food festival in northern Minnesota" (2), "[t]he nation's first-ever food festival" (19), where there will be "food demos, a garden market and tour, a canoe build and race, a concert, lacrosse, basketball, and horseshoe games, an art market and then the big dinner on Friday" (69), and which Niigaanii is also helping to organize. He is the Rainy Bay Community Center and Hotel kitchen manager, and he has created the "Food Sovereignty in Action Vehicle," aka "The Harvester," a wild foods processing and delivery vehicle aimed at empowering the community through local, sustainable foods (4). More than mere background detail, these culinary roles position food as an everyday political practice through which sovereignty is enacted. This is reinforced by the text's insistence on naming Indigenous

ingredients like the ones Winnow brings to the kitchen, which include "[n]ettle, dried juneberries, violet, lilac, and apple blossoms, some kind of dried leaves, maybe wild spinach, ramps, pickled purslane, wild bergamot, chaga jelly, hazelnuts, acorn, and manoomin flours" (69). The novel also incorporates many food words without translation, positioning Indigenous readership at the center of the narrative, as in "I do have some leftover ogaa naboob [walleye soup] though. That'll start us both off on the right track" (5), or "[i]t'll be a piece of wiishkobi-bakwezhigan [cake]" (10). The affirmative presentation of local foods culminates in the menu that they prepare for the event, which prompts everyone's "oohs and aahs" (121), and which is composed of land- and water-based foods such as manoomin, walleye, venison, wild berries, and greens, prepared in ways that affirm land-based knowledge and culinary self-determination.

Food also functions as a marker of time and place, connecting the narrative to seasonal rhythms and specific landscapes. The ripening of berries and fruits –juneberries, blueberries, chokecherries– maps the passing of time onto the land itself (Hart 2023, 11). Food further contributes to the articulation of identity as relational, as when Niigaanii tells Winnow that she is "made of wild plum, walleye, and wild dock" (94). Within this framework, food is experienced sensorially –through touch, smell and taste– and connected to pleasure, memory, and desire. Not surprisingly, the main characters' relation to food is explicitly embodied and erotic. This dynamic is evident in Niigaanii's response to mashkigobag (Labrador tea): the plant's "familiar silhouette [...] excites him" (20), and when he handles the leaves after offering asemaa, he presses them against his cheek "to feel the soft caress of their fuzz on his skin" (20), savoring the "delicate, floral aroma of the plant along with decades of good memories associated with the smell" (20). Touch and scent thus connect the human with nature in pleasure and memory. A similar connection qualifies Winnow's sensual engagement with food. When she opens a jar of manoomin she harvested, the act of smelling the wild rice brings her a vision of it growing on water, feeling "the sunshine and sore muscles from the weeks of harvest" as well as "the buttery-nutty scent of parching rice" (67). Food thus blurs temporal distance, bringing past and future experiences into the present moment of the body.

The process of getting to know each other is described through food as well. When Winnow enters Niigaanii's cabin, she feels close to him through his handling of food in the intimacy of his home:

> the smell of manoomin dust ensconced in the walls like marrow in bones, hanging herbs releasing their essences, and dried things filling jars on shelves winding the room, she feels like an exposed hermit crab stumbling into a shell that's a perfect fit. The front door opens to the kitchen. She sets the water pack on the counter and walks down the hall, following the trail of jars at eye level. The kind of love required here strikes her deep desire to connect with another human being over such a love like a tuning fork. (84)

Her attraction to Niigaanii is thus articulated as a desire for the form of love this space represents, rooted in care and nourishing intentions. As their relationship

deepens, sensory encounters with food merge with erotic experience. Winnow rubs powdered ingredients between the fingers and this produces "a new memory connected to this sensation; the silkiness of Niigaanii's skin," so that "[a] shiver runs down her spine and anchors in her loins" (122). Desire itself is framed through the language of ripeness and harvest, as when Winnow reflects that her "mind, spirit, and flesh are ripe for the picking when Niigaanii approaches her" (132). When Winnow brushes past Niigaanii, his scent, like "boiling manoomin and burning sweet grass" (134) ignites her longing, a hunger that "sears the tinder of her heart" (134) and draws her toward him. Erotic longing thus becomes an extension of nourishment and care, linking bodily desire to practices of sustenance that affirm Indigenous selfhood and interdependence.

Food is evidently nourishing, but in *Native Love Jams* it also becomes a mode of relational being, a material practice through which bodies open themselves up to other bodies, to nature, and to community. As scholars of Indigenous food sovereignty argue, food is never merely about rights but about responsibilities and relationships (Mihesuah & Hoover 2019, 11), and Indigenous food stories are themselves acts of decolonial knowledge-making that promote sovereignty (Katanski 2017). In Hart's hands, food becomes the vehicle through which original Indigenous cultures are imaginatively refashioned and revived (Pascual 2026), indigenizing the romance form and reaffirming epistemologies that refuse the separation between sustenance and desire, and between self and world.

5. CONCLUSION

In "Love and Romance Novels," Hsu-Ming Teo argues that as cultural understandings of love evolve, romance novels reflect these changing ideas in the way they depict falling in love, being in love, and what love should achieve (2020, 660). At the same time, she contends that "the discourses of love represented in romance novels feed back into and influence how particular societies recognize and understand the operation of romantic love in popular culture" (660). Romance is therefore a powerful pedagogical genre insofar as it naturalizes certain emotional norms and marginalizes others. This is particularly relevant in the context of Indigenous literatures, where love has not traditionally been the emotion most commonly represented, for cultural production has often been framed through narratives of trauma and loss. This makes Tashia Hart's decision to focus on love deeply political, turning romance into a decolonial form. Importantly, love in *Native Love Jams* is more than a bond between the romantic couple, for it is explicitly expanded to include self-love, care for the community, and sustaining connection to the natural world. The text redefines love as relational, land-based and communal, foregrounding forms of connection that counter settler colonial fragmentation and appropriation. Hart thus activates the pedagogical force of romance to reimagine Indigenous relationality, and rather than reproducing narratives in which Indigenous life is defined primarily through loss and trauma, she insists on joy and sensuality as legitimate Indigenous experiences in the present.

The reasons why Native Americans have not traditionally chosen the romance form are obvious, for romance has generally excluded or stereotyped Indigenous peoples. Yet, *Native Love Jams* is a sign that something is changing. By replacing damage-centered narratives with desire-based narratives grounded in Indigenous relationality, the novel normalizes the presence of Native characters not merely as survivors of colonial violence but as fully desiring subjects. The HEA ending thus becomes an assertion of survivance and sovereignty. In this sense, the novel affirms Indigenous belonging to cultural, social, and political life while simultaneously making Indigenous values more visible. The most explicit one is the understanding of food, which is central to the romance plot in the novel. Food –part of the relational world of the Indigenous context– organizes intimacy, erotic desire, temporal and spatial location, and it reworks desire as nourishment, care and continuity. Hence, the novel aligns affective sovereignty with food sovereignty, in such a way that intimacy, nourishment and relational caretaking flow together. It is by both working within and transforming the conventions of popular romance to articulate Indigenous representational sovereignty that *Native Love Jams* demonstrates how the genre itself can become a site of decolonial motivation. This Indigenous romance not only challenges whiteness as the genre's default and expands romance theory beyond liberal individualism, but also exemplifies the current third wave of Indigenous writing, which engages with popular genres in ways that powerfully enact sovereignty. We should therefore remain attentive to emerging Indigenous romance texts, for they promise further transformations of the genre as well as of the cultural imaginaries that shape understandings of love and relations.

Reviews sent to the author: 05/05/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 28/05/2026

WORKS CITED

Akiwenzie-Damm, Kateri. 2008. "Red Hot to the Touch: WRi[gh]ting Indigenous Erotica." In *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Drew Hayden Taylor. 109-123. Douglas & McIntyre.

Colvin, Chandra. 2024. "Minnesota Filmmakers Bring Author Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* to Life." *Minnesota Native News* (November 14). Accessed 19 December 2025. https://minnesotanativenews.org/minnesota-filmmakers-bring-author-tashia-harts-native-love-jams-to-life/

Colvin, Chandra. 2025. "Duluth-based Short Film Features Local Ojibwe Stories, Dark Comedy." *MPR News* (August 22). Accessed 19 December 2025. https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/08/22/duluthbased-short-film-features-local-ojibwe-stories-dark-comedy

Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2016. *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*. U of Arizona P.

Fernández Rodríguez, Carolina. 2019. "Chamorro WWII Romances: Combating Erasure with Tales of Survival and Vitality." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 8: n.p.

Fresno-Calleja, Paloma. 2023. "Introduction: New Romantic Narratives for the Twenty-First Century." *Esferas Literarias* 6: 1-5. https://doi.org/10.21071/elrl.vi6

The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. n.d. "Tashia Hart, Author of *Native Love Jams*." *thefriends.org*. n.d. Accessed 22 December 2025. https://thefriends.org/2024/04/18/36-finalists-blog-2024-tashia-hart/

Hart, Tashia. 2015. *Girl Unreserved*. CreateSpace.

Hart, Tashia. 2020. *Gidjie and the Wolves (The Intermediaries)*. (Not) Too Far Removed P.

Hart, Tashia. 2021. *The Good Berry Cookbook: Harvesting and Cooking Wild Rice and Other Wild Foods*. Minnesota Historical Society P.

Hart, Tashia. 2023. *Native Love Jams*. Not Too Far Removed P.

Hoorenman, Johanna. 2021. "Remembering Love: Parsons-Yazzie's Historical Romance Novel and the (Re)writing of Navajo History." In *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks. 270-282. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2023. "Romancing the University: BIPOC Scholars in Romance Novels in the 1980s and Now." *Esferas Literarias* 6: 39-55. https://doi.org/10.21071/elrl.vi6.16287.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 2020. "Introduction." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. 20-52. Routledge.

Katanski, Amelia V. 2017. "Stories That Nourish: Minnesota Anishinaabe Wild Rice Narratives." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41(3): 71-91. https://doi.org/10.17953/AICRJ.41.3.KATANSKI.

Krishna, Priya. 2019. "3 Indigenous Chefs Talk about What Thanksgiving Means to Them." *bonappetit.com* (November 25). Accessed 22 December 2025. https://www.bonappetit.com/story/indigenous-chefs-thanksgiving?srsltid=AfmBOor-lCsssZMuvxPsfb-TAY69srs4FW_5itpSaPg4f97mwLifAJdn.

LaDuke, Winona. 2019. "Foreword: In Praise of Seeds and Hope." In *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments and Regaining Health*. xiii-xvi. U of Oklahoma P.

Martínez-Falquina, Silvia. 2024. "Historical Reparation, Emotional Justice: The Navajo Long Walk in Evangeline Parsons Yazzie's *Her Land, Her Love*." In *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History*, eds. Hsu-Ming Teo & Paloma Fresno-Calleja. 157-179. Routledge.

Mihesuah, Devon. 2020. *Recovering Our Ancestors' Gardens: Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness (Revised)*. U of Nebraska P.

Mihesuah, Devon, & Elizabeth Hoover, eds. 2019. *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments and Regaining Health*. U of Oklahoma P.

Orange, Tommy. 2020. "Fighting and Winning with Louise Erdrich." *High Country News* (April 1). Accessed 19 December 2025. https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/ideas-books-fighting-and-winning-with-louise-erdrich/

Pascual, Nieves. 2026. "Culinary Resilience: Decolonizing Native American Foodways." *European Journal of American Studies* 21(1): n.p.

Regis, Pamela. 2003. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. U of Pennsylvania P.

Regis, Pamela. 2020. "The Evolution of the American Romance Novel." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 90-120. Routledge.

Roach, Catherine M. 2016. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana UP.

Roach, Catherine M. 2020. "A New Vision of Love: Diversity, Positive Sexuality and Cultural Change in America." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 59-68. Routledge.

Romance Writers of America (RWA). n.d. "About the Romance Genre." *Romance Writers of America: The Voice of Romance Writers*. Accessed 19 December 2025. https://www.rwa.org/the-romance-genre.

Suhr-Sytsma, Mandy. 2022. "Decolonizing Desire: The Indigenous YA Erotics of Cynthia Leitich Smith's *Hearts Unbroken*." *Studies in the Novel* 54(3): 312-332.

"Tashia Hart: Art, Nature and the Path to Growing Joy." 2023. *Native Lights: Where Indigenous Voices Shine* e111(s3) (17 August). Accessed 22 December 2025. https://minnesotanativenews.org/tashia-hart/.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2018. "The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford UP. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.415.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2020. "Love and Romance Novels." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 660-702. Routledge.

Tuck, Eve. 2009. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3): 409-427.

Yazzie, Evangeline Parsons. 2014. *Her Land, Her Love*. Salina Bookshelf.

Young, Erin S. 2020. "Race, Ethnicity, and Whiteness." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 742-766. Routledge.

CREATING PLACES: *PASEOS, VAIVÉN* AND *COMPADRAZGO* IN LATINX ROMANCE

Nattie Golubov
Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Abstract

This article examines the practices of place-making in 21st-century Latinx romance. In specific locations characters feel safe and connected within a thriving intergenerational social world indissociable from civic engagement rooted in local histories. Through the lens of geographical theories of place-making, I examine the Love & Tacos series by Alana Quintana Albertson, the Vega Family series by Natalie Caña and the Milagro Street series by Angelina M. Lopez, in which gentrification and agroindustry threaten to erase the many historical traces that make places meaningful when culture and context intersect, to argue that the romantic plot is a reclamation story which locates Latinx communities at the heart of urban life and economic activity in the US.

Keywords: Latinx romance, Place-making, Millennial romance, GenZ romance.

CREAR LUGARES: PASEOS, VAIVÉN Y COMPADRAZGO EN LA FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA LATINX

Resumen

Este artículo examina las prácticas que crean lugar en la ficción romántica Latinx del siglo XXI. En ubicaciones concretas lxs personajes se sienten segurxs y conectadxs en un próspero mundo social intergeneracional indisociable del compromiso cívico enraizado en la historia local. Usando como punto de partida la teoría geográfica del lugar, examino la serie Love & Tacos de Alana Quintana Albertson, la serie de la familia Vega por Natalie Caña y la serie Milagro Street de Angelina M. Lopez, en las que la gentrificación y la agroindustria amenazan con borrar los muchos rastros históricos que dan significado a los lugares en el cruce entre la cultura y el contexto, para argumentar que la trama romántica es una historia de recuperación que ubica a las comunidades Latinx en el centro de la vida urbana y la actividad económica en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: Ficción romántica Latinx, crear lugar, ficción romántica milenial, romance, generación Z.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.04
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 77-98; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

This article describes the processes whereby characters in 21st-century Latinx romance cultivate a strong sense of place as a precondition for the establishment of a home in a caring environment. To this end, the everyday intergenerational sociality of care work, civic engagement, economic prosperity, cultural activity and heritage-making connects with a quest to balance personal integrity and autonomy with social stability and justice. For second- and third-generation Latinx this place-making process is precipitated by a sense that they are "citizens but not Americans" (Flores-González 2017, 11). In the eight novels analysed here, as the romantic plot evolves, protagonists enact forms of belonging by assimilating their unique cultural legacies into their daily interactions in specific locations defined by long histories of immigration and settlement. As they make sense of the self by weaving their personal story into collective narratives, these characters deepen their emotional attachment to their communities, mobilise to ensure their survival and set about making a home at the intersection of these processes.

Latinx romance borrows more from the popular romance than *chica lit*, an adjacent genre: having dropped "tropes such as the first-person narration, humorous tone, middle-class status for the protagonist, city setting, professional job, college education, and a group of friends" (Hurt 2019, 1) typical of cosmopolitan *chick lit,* this fiction features moral integrity, professional fulfillment, intergenerational family solidarity, a dual point of view and, often, a less playful tone. This shift from the pursuit of neoliberal values and consumer culture to a focus on community and a strong sense of place anchored in local histories differentiates Latinx romance from early 21st century *chica lit*. *After Hours on Milagro Street* (2022) and *Full Moon Over Freedom* (2023) by Angelina M. Lopez, *Ramón and Julieta* (2022), *Kiss Me, Mi Amor* (2023) and *My Fair Señor* (2025) by Alana Quintana Albertson and Natalie Caña's *A Proposal They Can't Refus*e (2022), *A Dish Best Served Hot* (2023) and *Sleeping With the Frenemy* (2024) depict the experience of MillenniGenZ Latinx men and women who reach a happy ending by resolving the conflict between a quest for self-realisation and a preoccupation with the prosperity of their workplaces and neighbourhoods.[1] Place is entangled with these processes as the novels show that, contrary to their stigmatisation as always already foreign racialised others, "Latines have shaped economies, classrooms and communities. ... Latines have also shaped the built environment" (Rast 2023, 86). Characters' status as 'legal' citizens is a given, their ability to 'integrate' into mainstream US culture proven (they are native English speakers, college-educated, politically liberal), yet they settle in their place

[1] MillenniGenZ are generational cohorts for whom diversity, inclusion, social justice, equity and rights are normalised in schools and work settings; they are also aware of climate and restorative justice. In the novels, characters' ages fall within this range, born between 1982-1998 and 1999-2020 (Wachs & Yu Danico 2025, 5).

of origin to make a stand for themselves and their multigenerational communities by actively contributing to their economic security.

This generational cohort has a foundation of rights won by previous generations, has witnessed the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, but has also felt increasingly disenfranchised since 2016 (Wachs & Yu Danico 2025, 8). Lopez explicitly references Trumpism and the importance of history in Latinx storytelling in the contest against the white-washing of the past:

> I developed the Milagro Street series in the shadows of the 2020 election, when we'd elected a man who made brown people feel unwelcome and unsafe in this country and who had enough voter support that they might elect him again. I felt my family's story, about Mexican-Americans who've lived and contributed to a small town in the Midwest for several generations, was an important story to make known. We've been here in the heart of the country, I wanted people to know. We'll continue to be here and this country is better for it. (Lopez 2023)

Latinx romance demonstrates that the friction between Latinidad and mainstream US (white) culture cannot be resolved through a process of integration because individual agency alone will not transform structural racism, sexism or economic exploitation. Thus, two phenomena frame contemporary Latinx romance: the racialisation and criminalisation of Latinx since the first Trump administration and the fictionalisation of the Latinx MillenniGenZ "fight to belong" to an ethnic community rather than American mainstream culture (Flores-González 2017, ix).

This essay cannot do justice to the complexity and distinctiveness of each novel because its primary purpose is to signal shared preoccupations arising from their moment. Therefore, the novels will be discussed relative to topics directly related to place-making, while many other issues such as the cost of health care, the labouring body, employment discrimination, disability, neurodivergence, Afro-Latinidad, body positivity, have been set aside for reasons of space, although they are an integral part of the narrative worlds.

2. LATINX ROMANCE

I read these novels as Latinx because they are "written by Latinxs exploring Latinx life and culture" (Sánchez-González 2020, 200). Quintana Albertson identifies as a "Latina" author, Lopez describes her Milagro Street books as a "small town, Latinx series" and Natalie Caña rejects "the identity of Afro-Latina" for herself (Threads 09/09/24) but identifies as "Latine" and Puerto Rican (Boswell Book Company, min. 5.15), while using "Latinx" in the novels to encompass people beyond the immediate Puerto Rican social world. Perhaps because the novels focus less on individuals than on interdependent groups of people, the experience of ethnocultural specificity is central to the resolution of the main characters' transformation, showing an awareness that Latinx is an inclusive "category of naming" (Guidotti-Hernández 2017, 142).

In the context of the Trump era, "Latine" racial ideologies homogenise difference "regardless of national origin, race, class, or generation" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 153), so the cultural specificity depicted in the novels may be a strategy that pushes against this blanket racialisation. Latinx, for Guidotti-Hernandez, refers to an affective, antiessentialist community grounded in inclusion rather than identity fixity, a liberatory and post-nationalist gesture from a generation that is uncomfortable with the nationalist paradigms of previous immigrant generations and feels less pressure to assimilate into mainstream culture, transforming cultural resources into a strength rather than a liability. Indeed, in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Julieta is acutely aware of the power of naming and categorisation: "Could we please use the word *Latines*? It's more inclusive" (Quintana Albertson 2023,13). Natalie Caña in a Threads post on October 30, 2024 sums up the Latinx experience in the current political landscape thus:

> It's not hard to understand that, to the enemy, we are all the same. We may have different skin tones, speak different languages, love different genders, and practice different beliefs BUT to them we are just "other" and "less". They might tolerate certain kinds of people more, but that doesn't change the fact that they hate us all. We need to be fighting for each other all of the time, not some (n.p.)

Guidotti-Hernández notes that labels such as *Puerto Rican* or *Chicano/ Nuyorican* operated within ethno-nationalist and patriarchal frameworks, excluding many groups (Central Americans, Afro-Latinxs, Indigenous peoples, queer and trans subjects), so Latinx appears as a response to gender fatigue and nationalist exclusions in the late 2000s when millennials, especially queer communities, popularised Latinx through digital media as an emblem of collective belonging anchored in care, empathy, and shared affect rather than nationalist ideology. The term carries an "affective overload" –the weight of histories of exclusion and the emotional charge of asserting belonging against racism, heteronormativity, and whiteness. According to Guidotti-Hernández, millennials prioritize inclusivity, fluidity, and coalition-building over fixed categories rooted in shared affective experiences of exclusion. Thus, in her view, Latinx becomes not just a linguistic innovation but an emotional and ethical project– a practice of inclusion that allows individuals to belong without erasing difference. In this respect, the novels focus less on the experience of discrimination (although awareness of it is ever present) than on working out strategies to harmonise the exigencies of a fulfilling personal life with the ethical imperative to create the conditions necessary for a community to thrive as it contends with gentrifying forces and unethical business practices disruptive of the collective lives of Latinx long-time residents and institutions.

"Did she want to be the selfless warrior her community needed or did she want to be happy?" asks Lola in *A Dish Best Served Hot*. "Why couldn't she do both? What was preventing her from being happy and continuing the work she loved?" (Caña 2023, 203). I argue that this is the central dilemma of the Latinx romance novels discussed here and it is resolved when the protagonists accept that their lives are meaningful as they actively collaborate in the making of their community: happiness

and emotional integrity are thus not about personal fulfilment alone, but embrace the practice of sustaining and being sustained by that which The Care Collective has named "circles of care" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 20). To enable the relationship of mutuality upon which these circles rely, trust is indispensable because it depends on the assumption that the other person "always intends your good" (hooks 2001, 46). In contrast, deception "diminishes and erodes the possibility of meaningful, caring connection" (hooks 2001, 42) because it opens the door to betrayal and disloyalty; in this respect, the common plot device of the secret and secrecy provides an obstacle to true commitment, though once revealed, the truth not only explains behaviour but also paves the way for the characters to take responsibility for their own actions and their impact on others, which can be positive or negative, a lesson learned as they negotiate their various relationships.

Notably, the most oppressive forms of violence in the novels are patriarchal. Be they white, Mexican or Puerto Rican, patriarchs enact an out-moded manhood manifested as *machismo* (Cowan 2017). Caught between the stereotype of the hypersexed, criminalised "bad hombre" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 151) and the "ever-present yet totally absent" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 3) Latin American family patriarch, the journey of Latinx male characters fashions a different masculinity. The exploration of caregiving and caretaking masculinities may be one answer to the questions: "What will it take for Latinx folx, families, and communities to decolonize toxic/macho masculinities? [...] When will Latinx boys be encouraged to practice ways of being that are 'strong' and 'down' with a deep politics of caring, compassion, and love for all humans and nonhumans in a world of ever-increasing racist, misogynistic, and homo/transphobic violence(s)?" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 5). Latinx romance fiction is one step in this direction: in Quintana Alberston's *My Fair Señor* Jaime Montez acknowledges that "machismo had benefited him clearly, but it didn't sit right with him" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 146). He and his brothers keep their father at arm's length as they integrate into the heroines' "communities of resistance," understood by bell hooks as "places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" (hooks 2004, 153). The Montez brothers "heal" the painful cultural distance from their Mexican heritage by attaching themselves to women who have never lost their place in the community and are keenly aware of injustice. To move away from the role of the patriarchal "protector" (hooks 2004, 131), these Latinx heroes learn to become carers: caring implies reciprocity between care givers and care receivers, while protecting assumes the subordination of those who are perceived as having need of protection. For example, in Natalie Caña's *A Dish Best Served Hot* the hero, Saint, against his soldierly instincts, must learn to respect Lola's risky activism while she, in turn, acknowledges that there are ways to fight for justice without putting herself in danger (Caña 2023, 320).

Decolonizing "generational reproductions (ongoing since our colonization) of toxic masculinity" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 9) is one of the issues concerning these generations: in Angelina M. Lopez's *After Hours on Milagro Street* the male protagonist, Jeremiah Post, has changed his name to distance himself from a white East Coast family, his father's attitude towards him described as dismissive (Lopez

2022, 290); in *Full Moon Over Freedom*, also by Lopez, Nicky's father, "Raymundo Mendoza, had driven away in his ice-blue tractor trailer with everything except the girl he'd knocked up in high school, two boys, and a crate of classic rock tapes" (Lopez 2023, 50). Similarly, in *Ramón and Julieta* the hero repudiates his father to reclaim his Mexican identity and by the end of the novel has "not yet reconciled with his father, but they had begun therapy" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 266) while his brother, Enrique Montez, acknowledges "his father's deeply ingrained machismo" (10), his quest is to "be his own man – out of the shadow of his father and brother" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 12) in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*; Jaime in *My Fair Señor* also takes up therapy and leaves San Diego as part of the process to distance himself from his domineering father, who "saw his three sons as mere extensions of himself" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 41). Natalie Caña's heroes also undergo a transformation: Leo in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* is forced to reinvent himself with an injured body, "struggling with his place in his own life" (Caña 2024, 102), while Liam recovers from childhood trauma in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, and Saint unexpectedly becomes a single father with PTSD in *A Dish Best Served Hot*. Contrary to the idea that Latinx men are unskilled labourers and criminals, we encounter a wide range of highly trained, self-aware, confident, articulate and sensitive men, ranging from an ex Special Forces contractor to a renowned artist, a salsa-singing firefighter, the guitarron-playing CEO of a family company who surfs and a horticulturalist who practices yoga and meditation, a popular influencer, model and owner of a tequila brand who funds a soccer academy to provide opportunities to poor children. Even gang membership and drug addiction are rewritten as products of failed social systems in *A Dish Best Served Hot* and *Full Moon Over Freedom* respectively. These are not the "pelados, machos and pachucos" (Cowan 2017, 609) of Trump's gendered racial ideologies but men who challenge the idea of the patriarch for their own – and others'– welfare.

The oppressive shadow of an outdated masculinity unites the couple as a key marker of generational identity, articulated by the dual point of view. The heroines' fierceness is a product of circumstance in that they have learned to make themselves visible and audible in both their family and the workplace: although seemingly reproducing the stereotypical image of the sensual, impassioned Latina, heroines use it to their advantage, as Alex declares in *After Hours on Milagro Street*: "The world expected an angry brown woman" (Lopez 2022, 65) so she strategically plays up to the expectation. This deliberate performance of Latinidad de-essentialises notions of gender, ethnicity and race, a process often witnessed when lovers adjust their misconceptions about each other by replacing prejudice with empathy. The following change of perspective from *After Hours* is illustrative of a common process:

> At last, he understood who that woman was and why she was so fascinating to so many. She was good at her job. And she showed everyone what she had to do to be successful at it. People didn't adore her because they liked to be flogged; they admired her because she gave an inspiring example of a way to be. Proud. Uncompromising. Unwilling to accept anyone's crap. Alex's flaming sword would help protect Milagro Street's limitless potential. (Lopez 2022, 249)

This dismantling of stereotype and prejudice may be read as a gesture towards a form of love described by Chela Sandoval as decolonial because it eludes dominant narratives of love by incorporating other signifying systems into the process of embracing the lover's complexity. In this respect, the centrality of art, music and food in courtship is vital as these creative practices are different languages (Sandoval 2000, 147) that engage the senses, involve rituals, public celebrations such as the *Fiestas Patronales Puertorriqueñas*, the Day of the Dead, lowrider cruises, *Cinco de Mayo* and *Pastorela* and the multigenerational and multicultural conviviality these strengthen. Unlike other forms of love, in Latinx romance courting is displayed, indicating that it is a public ritual because the community is implicated in its fate: the couples in Caña's Vega family series are thrown together by meddling grandparents, for example. Couples romance in public through various embodied, sensual languages which are integral to their cultures. In *My Fair Señor* the *Cinco de Mayo* festival is a "sensory delight" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 161) during which love "take[s] root" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 165): "Families, friends and couples wandered throughout the streets, laughing and enjoying the festivities that had taken over the town park. It was so heartwarming to see a community that suffered so much come together and be part of so much joy" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 161). Here, to accommodate the couple within an extended family, love is comprehensive rather than exclusive, a modification of Western "couple-normativity" (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, et.al. 2020, 4) and its orientation toward the nuclear family. When it becomes a social rather than a private bond romantic love metamorphoses into a daily oppositional practice because it defies the obstacles that hinder the bond between individuals and their community, such as divisive structural inequalities and the ideologies that reproduce them. Throughout the novels, public spaces are occupied by cultural activities to which the characters voluntarily contribute, thus confirming their right to be there.

In Quintana Albertson's *My Fair Señor*, for example, Alma's brother Carlos lobbies several Latinx-owned companies to participate in a festival to raise money for the youth soccer team he coaches in the impoverished community of San Rafael. Alma, the heroine, has thrived in a wealthy area, yet she unhesitatingly offers support because "it didn't matter by what means she could help the members of her community; it mattered that she helped them. Period" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 19). As in the other novels, civic engagement and service are inextricably entangled with ties to families of origin and neighbours, a material expression of a type of "communal love" (hooks 2001, 141) which accepts the need of interdependency and "mutual giving" (hooks 2001, 143) for survival and flourishing: irrespective of their personal story and motivations, characters' goals and interests coincide when the fate of the community is at stake. The love story evolves as the lovers collaborate to ensure the existence of their communities by drawing upon a wide range of resources, including cultural practices (muralism, music, cuisine), heritage, as well as professional expertise, money and influence (Jaime Montez is an influencer, as is Alex in *After Hours on Milagro Street*).

Gender inequalities and sexism are challenged when the heroine's struggle for autonomy implies a break with fathers or paternal figures and, often, a reclamation

of female role models. Thus, in *After Hours on Milagro Street,* Alejandra must make peace with a negligent white alcoholic father, whose surname –Armstead– she has dropped in favour of her mother's, Torres, while her sister Juliana returns to Freedom having divorced her white husband, whose "toxic masculinity" (Lopez 2023, 210) is controlling, manipulative and emotionally abusive; in a similar rejection of anachronistic masculinity, though a hard-worker, Julieta's father drinks and smokes himself to death in *Ramón and Julieta*; in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Carolina "is sick to death of Papá's archaic rules about women" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 23), while Alma's Papá and Mamá who, though "progressive" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 86), are conventional in their notion that "Alma, at the tender age of twenty-five, was an old maid" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 87). Lola Leon's father in *A Dish Best Served Hot* is an incarcerated gang leader unconcerned for his daughter's life, Sofia Santana accepts that she is "*broken*" as she cannot trust anyone, never having felt protected and loved by hers (Caña 2023, 309; italics in original). A father who is not shunned outright is Kamilah's Papi in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, although his conception of her as an "aimless daughter, who went through the motions but never really accomplished anything" (Caña 2022, 36) is a major obstacle in her plan to save the family business.

Inevitably, *machismo* destroys families: parents are divorced, fathers absent, mothers distant, unlike grandfathers for example, who are benevolent and symbolically powerful, often replacing absent parents, or grandmothers, whose power is bequeathed matrilineally. Thus, Lola inherits her "social justice and warrior tendencies" from her grandfather, Benito, who fought "tooth and nail toward the independence of Puerto Rico" (Caña 2023, 26) and taught her the story of her namesake, Lolita Lebrón, a Puerto Rican hero who spent 25 years in prison for shooting at the ceiling in the House of Representatives while shouting "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" (Caña 2023, 78), whereas the Torres sisters choose to ensure local livelihoods by continuing the community work of their female ancestors. Jaime Montez's reluctance to commit himself to Alma in *My Fair Señor* derives directly from his parent's "horrible" marriage (Quintana Albertson 2025, 221) and "nasty" divorce (Quintana Albertson 2025, 218). Despite the lasting effect of their fathers' *machismo*, extended family is the source of a nurturing, loving form of shelter and joy. As suggested by bell hooks, unlike isolated, atomised nuclear families, extended families which incorporate "nonblood kin" exist as part of larger communities (hooks 2001, 132). Both heroes and heroines learn to care for the self while caring for loved ones and community (hooks 2001, 5), following a process of self-transformation which entails a rejection of individualism and a disposition to accept caregiving, here not exclusively about tending the infirm, disabled or elderly, but a "social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare of life" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 13), encompassing a stray dog in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* and an abandoned train station in *Full Moon Over Freedom*, restored as a public museum.

Characters' civic engagement can be understood as an expression of a "differential form of consciousness," a type of oppositional practice Chela Sandoval traces back to U.S. third world feminism of the 1970s-1980s. In line with this form

of resistance, the characters bring to bear a multitude of weapons and tactics to their battles over their right to direct the transformation of their neighbourhoods: awareness of legal and property rights, financial savviness and historical knowledge, professional know-how and talent, ethical work practices, respect for tangible and intangible heritage and alternative narratives of place. Sandoval argues that a differential mode of social consciousness requires flexibility and strength, the "practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand suited to push against oppression, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples" (2000, 59). In *Full Moon Over Freedom* Juliana turns her back on corporate America to offer financial planning services to women, people of color and the disadvantaged (Lopez 2023, 269), her award-winning mixologist sister, Alex, saves Loretta's bar from closure by revamping the menu and the venue and using social media to her advantage; both join the community's effort to prevent the death of the previously vibrant east side of Freedom that has historically catered to Mexican Americans (Lopez 2022, 17). Sofia in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* resigns from her grandfather's company to set up her own event planning business after being harassed by a client in front of her unperturbed father, while Lola León, the queer heroine in *A Dish Best Served Hot,* teaches at a community center and fights for the rights of unhoused queer youth. In *Ramón and Julieta*, Julieta introduces fresh and sustainable seafood into the fast-food industry and her restaurant, Las Pescas, receives a Michelin star; in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Carolina Flores (with a combined bachelor's and master's degree in agricultural science) owns a farm that pays a living wage, offers healthy working conditions for her workers and access to affordable housing, while and Alma Garcia, in *My Fair Señor* is a "female tequiladora" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 16) in the "male-dominated liquor industry" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 16), owns Mexcalifornia, a successful tequila bar and deliberately partners with other women in the industry: "Women who harvested their own agave. Women who bottled their own brands. Women who distilled their own liquor" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 17). For a generation devastated by the Great Recession in 2007-2009, economic security is imperative: the protagonists use their expertise to save their parents' flagging businesses (or establish their own) with a more ethical approach, environmental awareness, pro worker rights and attuned to shifting patterns of consumption. Again, as Canizales and Vallejo have pointed out, "Latine" women and children are perceived as "public resource drainers" (2021, 152) in the Trumpian "Latino threat narrative," a stereotype countered with these stories of enterprising women. Indeed, there is explicit contestation of this narrative in *Sleeping with the Frenemy*: "*She wouldn't call her mom a workaholic, but she was definitely a hard worker. When Sofi was a kid, she'd held multiple jobs while also going to nursing school .... She always said that single moms didn't really have any other choice unless they were going to live off the state and she wasn't going to do that*" Caña 2024, 44; italics in original).

Their oppositional consciousness and practice encompass a wide variety of caregiving experiences: for example, work is a means to an end and the foundation of a sense of self and purpose, but also an expression of emotional and civic engagement with family and community, a "sharing of resources" (hooks 2001, 163) such as time, skills, money, shelter, food. The *cuidados* (Chabram, Deeb-Sossa and Flores 2024,

3) required by the infirm, vulnerable and injured are shared among family members and friends. Couples learn mutual care as their love evolves, that is, to see each other as they are with clear eyes, respect, trust and responsibility for each other's wellbeing (hooks 2001, 7). Simultaneously, protagonists learn to be cared for by accepting their need for "mutual support" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 3): the heroines return to their place of origin after experiencing hostility while away from home to realise that they are no longer alone, or they acknowledge that they cannot singlehandedly achieve their goals; the male characters undergo their own transformation by rejecting a protective masculinity, which is explicitly articulated, for example, when Kamilah advises her brother Leo that he needs to "let [Sofia] know that she's safe with you physically, mentally, emotionally. Her well-being is your priority" (Caña 2024, 304). Leo goes on to realise that he must "stop trying to change" Sofia and instead "be there for her" as she tries to make better, less harmful choices (Caña 2024, 305). Moral integrity is prioritised over compliance with paternal sexist expectations of a "patriarchal maleness" (hooks 2004, 155).

These diverse caregiving experiences embody the nature of characters' many relationships (Chabram, Deeb-Sossa & Flores 2024, 3): that is, caring for a business, caring for an injured partner or caring for the psychological and physical well-being of a marginalised group of queer youths exist on a continuum that is spatially mapped. The novels thus point to a geography of care in that it is presented as an everyday occurrence, often framed as a familial obligation which is neither resented nor devalued, and thus a collective responsibility situated at the heart of the community in a "localised environment" (Chatzidakis, Hakim, Littler, Rottenberg & Segal 2020, 38).

3. MAKING PLACE

Places are "imbroglios of *traces*" (Anderson 2015, 6), concentrating tangible and intangible, large and small, enduring and ephemeral "marks, residues or remnants left in place by cultural life" (6), dynamically tying together cultural practices and geographies, thus converting places into vibrant "ongoing compositions of traces" (Anderson 2015, 6-7). According to Jon Anderson, they have three constituent parts: location (an objective point in space), locale (which refers to the composite of "all the traces that come together in one place" [Anderson 2015, 53]) and sense of place, that is, the emotional, experiential and affective traces that tie humans to particular environments and which are key to uniting people, in short, their "lived emplacement" (Seamon 2025, 23). The novels are locatable on a map: Chicago's Humboldt Park, a small town in Kansas, Barrio Logan and Chicano Park in San Diego, and Santa Maria and Marin County, California. As the love plots become entwined with the experience of lived emplacement, a dense plethora of traces come into play to signify place: buildings, monuments, activities, events, emotions, sounds, smells, tie geographies and cultures together (Anderson 2015, 7). The sense of belonging does not hinge exclusively upon affinity with culturally similar others but involves rootedness in the history of places and the cohesion of locale, location

and attachment: place becomes "a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world" (Cresswell 2015, 18), a worldview. Couples fall in love in specific places as they simultaneously fall in love with those places, two apparently independent processes that become inseparable emotions elicited by memories and new experiences. Although their love of place may initially differ or indeed conflict, by the end it is shared as the couples join forces to protect communities. So, place is not merely a backdrop to their encounter as it shapes the very nature of the relationship, just as their own stories become traces that contribute to the "becoming" (Cresswell, 2015, 65) of place.

To focus the significance of place in the development of an undivided self, mobility in many forms is at the center of the action. Latinx characters are aware of the relationship between transnational migrant flows, past and present U.S. imperialism and immigration policies, but the horizon for their sense of belonging is not the US nation-state or their parents' homeland, but bounded, vibrant places shaped by social, cultural and economic forces past and present. These places are ethnically marked by a spatial politics that dictates who belongs where, who is a trespasser and who a local: for example, in Lopez's *After Hours on Milagro Street* Alex Torres initially considers the white male protagonist –Jeremiah Post– a "Stranger. A foreigner" (Lopez 2022, 34) who is "playing white saviour" to her community (Lopez 2022, 54). Freedom, Kansas, is divided along ethnic lines: Milagro Street's two boarded-up blocks are economically and symbolically distant from the more prosperous Main Street, "a four-block-long string of neoclassical and Classic revival buildings ... anchored by the pretty Carnegie endowed library on one end and the Art-Deco-styled city hall on the other" (Lopez 2022, 77). In Quintana Albertson's first two novels of the series the heroes are unwelcome in traditionally Mexican areas because their social class has displaced them geographically, while Jaime in the third novel becomes Mexican by traveling to Mexico to gain knowledge of the tequila industry and returns "full of potential for something genuine, something real" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 194). Marin County is marked by the contrast between wealthy Tiburon and impoverished Canal, "the most segregated part in the Bay Area" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 21). The cultural and physical borders that shape fictional places are a source of political and emotional conflict as well as the expression of active boundary-making, an assertion of collective identity and of the right to inhabit specific places despite the pressures of "Americanization" such as corporate culture, capitalist individualism and the commodification of ethnicity driving urban change.

Thus, *Ramón and Julieta* maps a clear contrast between La Jolla, Coronado and Barrio Logan. Class conflict is played out in the novel between local family-owned small businesses and the Montez Group, with over two hundred franchised Taco King "fast-casual" Mexican food restaurants and thousands of employees in San Diego. Ramón, the CEO, is identified as a "coconut," "brown on the outside, white on the inside" although he feels "Mexican in his soul" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 11). He is accused of being a "gentrifier" and his family traitorous because of their unethical business practices: they buy a block in Barrio Logan to expand their company, which has profited from a stolen taco recipe and caters to tourists by

reproducing the stereotypical image of a Mexican restaurant and decoupling food from place. Ramón's narrative arc describes a deepening of his understanding of the ties between place, class, people and culture:

> Ramón exited off the freeway. The vibrant Aztec warriors on the mural greeted him. Cultural pride beamed in his chest. The artwork in Chicano Park was legendary. His own father had once protested to preserve the park when the city of San Diego wanted to turn it into a parking lot for a future California Highway Patrol station. Papá had joined other Chicanos and made a human chain around the bulldozers. The irony hung heavy on Ramón – Papá had once fought hard to preserve the culture of this community, and now he would battle to strip the town of its vibe. (64)

Ramón imagines the branding of ethnicity on a "Starbucks Barrio Logan mug with a drawing of Chicano Park" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 84), which mirrors the commercialization of "gaudy" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 45) Mexicanness by Taco King: waitresses in Mexican gowns, hair braided with colorful ribbons, giant margaritas, mariachis, "basic Mexican food at affordable prices" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 46) prepared with frozen and canned ingredients. Ramón eventually ousts his father from the company to protect Barrio Logan after recognizing "an important element. The People" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 88) in the making of the neighbourhood. He transfers ownership of the block to Julieta's mother in compensation for stealing her fish taco recipe and as Julieta's partner, plans to open a vegan location (Quintana Albertson 2022, 265). Here, the barrio is made by cooperative human interaction and creativity expressed as street art, public infrastructure, conflict and emotion, the past engraved in memory and materially. Ramón sets out to find his way as a "proud Mexican man" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 254), resolving his crisis of identity: "Who was he without his wealth and name?" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 42). The novel indicates that change is necessary to survival, but it cannot occur in isolation: as his relationship with Julieta progresses towards the happy ending, his world becomes increasingly populated with those others committed to protecting embodied place: "There would be no La Jolla without Mexicans. They were the gardeners, they were the cooks, they were the maids, and they were the nannies who raised the children of these millionaires –like his own nanny Berta. They were important, and they had voices, and for years Ramón hadn't heard them. But today he listened to their words, loud and clear" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 143). In La Jolla they are service workers, taking care of employers' needs, in Barrio Logan –on the other side of the bridge– they are business-owners, caring for clients, workers and suppliers.

In contrast, Las Pescas, the heroine's "sea-to-table taqueria," experiments with traditional Mexican cuisine by fusing ingredients, techniques, flavours, uses sustainable seafood and locally sourced ingredients, caters to the community and is fiercely loyal to "the barrio, where she belonged" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 60). Unlike the fare offered by Taco King, hers is a place-specific cuisine. We also see the same historic landmark from Julieta's perspective when she observes the biweekly

La Vuelta Lowrider Cruise from within, one of many cultural practices that give meaning to the area:

> Classic cars would line the streets, music blasted from the radios, and drivers would bounce their automobiles, defying gravity. Julieta loved her town. She greeted everyone she passed on the block. Children from the local day care slid down the slippery slide at Chicano Park. Toddler's laughter rang through the air, and Julieta smiled. She would often make the local kids bean and cheese burritos for lunch. Many of their parents couldn't afford food and their siblings' only meal of the day was at the local elementary school. But the people in the community always took care of one another. No matter what. What would happen when they were all displaced? ... Chicano Park was the heart of her community. Nestled under the Coronado Bridge was the most magnificent artwork. It was full of historic Chicano murals featuring Mexican-American leaders. The scent from the dream sage in the herb garden mingle with the sweet smell of her mango. A little girl's ball bounced and became stuck between the legs of Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Joy flushed through her. She remembered coming here. Every week with her parents. This place was the brightness in their concrete jungle. (Quintana Albertson 2022, 74)

The same location and locale mean differently. Ramón has been cut-off from his cultural heritage by upward mobility but becomes aware of class conflict while working the kitchen of Julieta's restaurant and interacting with the locals: manual labor puts him in place. Julieta struggles against conservative gender norms and loyalty to her community, facing the choice between personal autonomy and tradition: initially she is too invested while he is disinvested in the future of the community. Similarly, in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor* Ramón's brother, Enrique, gives up his life to partner with the heroine, Carolina, a Latinx farm owner: he becomes aware of the back-breaking labour of farmworkers after working alongside them. Jaime, the youngest brother, feeling used by brands as the "token Mexican" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 26) hired for the sake of diversity although he doesn't speak Spanish, eventually feels a "deep connection to this land. It was more than just a place; it was a living, breathing tapestry of culture, tradition and beauty" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 177). In these three novels by Quintana Albertson the heroines do not question their ethnic identities but face the enduring hold of *machismo* on Mexican-American men, though tensions arise when young women are caught between their loyalty to their people and self-care.

Promenading and lowrider cruising are ways to "make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory" (Cresswell 2006, 121). *Las Posadas*, a Christian festivity celebrated in Quintana Albertson's *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, is reinterpreted as a representation of immigration: "Many immigrants related to the experience of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter and being refused. It was cultural, even if you weren't a Catholic" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 25). Enrique courts Carolina by walking with her in the procession and afterwards, through her fields and Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. *Ramón and Julieta* begins with the Day of the Dead and, as mentioned above, includes car cruising (that dates back to the 1940s) in Barrio Logan: there were "lifted cars and

low cars, old cars and new cars, expensive cars and beaters. And every one of them was glorious" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 189). *My Fair Señor*, the most recent novel in the series, describes the *Cinco de Mayo* festivities in Pickleweed Park and the *Fiesta de San Isidro* in Jalisco, Mexico. All the *paseos* taken by the couples immersed in these festivities are "ways of not getting anywhere, but a way of being somewhere, and its movements are essentially circular, whether on foot or by car" (Solnit 2000, 52). Public *paseos* are fundamental to the development of romance but also means of inscribing culture in space and thus foster conviviality, because public spaces are presented as "egalitarian" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 40).

Although MillenniGenZ protagonists are highly mobile, within the narrative time frame they move back to their place of origin. Excepting Carolina, who moves away from her family in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, female protagonists begin anew in the places they initially abandoned for various reasons, a return that acknowledges that systemic discrimination can only be transformed by resourceful collective action in specific locations that have historically embedded, resilient immigrant communities. In their absence places have changed, of course, so their integration into a once-familiar environment involves an emotional journey as protagonists resignify their attachments to place by negotiating different forms of connectedness. Latinx romance suggests that the safest and vital locales are those that are stabilized through relationships to spaces that exist in a "nested fabric of smaller and larger places" comprising a lifeworld, "e.g. household, workplace, shopping venues, places of recreation, worship, and so forth" (Seamon 2018, 49). The novels offer elaborate descriptions of buildings and their uses, as well as public infrastructure such as parks and roads, and provide detailed histories of neighbourhoods and built environments, the smallest unit usually a workplace.

Much like *Ramón and Julieta*, *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, *A Dish Best Served Hot*, *After Hours on Milagro Street, Full Moon Over Freedom* by Natalie Caña also describe how buildings represent different sets of ideas for different people, illustrating how clashing value systems and unequal access to power give meaning to specific places that are at the crossroads of processes such as 'forward-looking' gentrification, economic survival and emotional attachment to "places-past" (Anderson 2015, 13).[2] In these novels, buildings become "saturated with cultural [and personal] meanings" (Anderson 2015, 51): trade and professional pride, financial well-being, migration, material objects, pain and conflict, personal memories and collective and family histories transform brick and mortar into lived spaces: indeed, in the Milagro Street series, the old Hugh Building, home to Loretta's bar for forty years, comes alive, haunted by both the racist ghost of Wayland Hugh, whose equally dehumanizing descendant, Dutimeyer, is laying claim to the building to "develop" the run-down area described as a "shithole," stating that he seeks to "wash out the trash, then put the Hugh shine back on it" (Lopez 2022, 81), and the ghostly presence of Alex's

[2] Set in West San Antonio, Texas, *West Side Love Story* by Priscilla Oliveras also addresses the local resistance to gentrification by the people served by a neighbourhood community centre.

great grandmother, Rosalinda Padilla, married to Edward Hugh, repudiated by his father for marrying her. Dutimeyer, in cahoots with local authorities, is buying cheap abandoned and foreclosed properties along Milagro Street with the intention of building a "few properties that'll make that side less of a blight on the whole town" (Lopez 2022, 80). The spatial segregation is shown up as an illusory ethnic mapping once Alex discovers that she is "half-brown-Mexican and half white-American" (Lopez 2022, 14): the "tear" (Lopez 2022, 341) in the fabric of the town, originated by Wayland Hugh's repudiation of his son, can only be repaired by his Mexican-American descendants. In a letter found hidden in the bar by Alex, Rosalinda explains her active nurture of ties between place and people:

> *This town is my home and my children are its citizens. I have lived my life working to strengthen it. And yet a tear began when Wayland Hugh repudiated the son who loved him and lied for him. The tear, I fear, will only rend further with my husband's refusal to forgive his father and accept his effort to make amends. I will not go against my husband's wishes, but I will protect our children's inheritance, in life and in death. If you have discovered this, it is because you are nuestra sangre, of our blood, and you have the will and might and love to mend what was broken. Be strong, do good with what your grandfather left you, and remember, in your strength, to have love in your heart.* (Lopez 2022, 341; italics in original)

Just like Alex's innovative cocktails lead "the movement connecting Midwesterners with Mezcal" (Lopez 2022, 11), her ancestry proves that migration has cultivated cultural hybridity. Here it is not immigrants who destroy the social fabric but white racists, whose xenophobia is of long standing: the novel demonstrates how many traces, from extant documents to Prohibition-era bottles of bootlegged alcohol and *milagros*, volunteer associations such as the Freedom Historical Society, ghosts and a host of unique emotional attachments come together to shape the meanings of the building.

The second novel involves the restoration of the train station to house a museum dedicated to the story of Mexican-Americans in a community currently reduced to "three blocks with a few struggling businesses" (Lopez 2023, 42). In *Full Moon* Gillian/Juliana also becomes aware of the structural discrimination of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as she involves herself in rewriting local history when she assembles a grant proposal: initially neither she nor her sister Alex intend to settle in Freedom, yet the discovery of a (her)story of survival based on cooperation in which they insert themselves, grounds their choice to stay. The novel incorporates elements of magical realism to bind Juliana to place; she too is haunted, this time by a figure that she initially takes to be La Llorona, but eventually is confirmed to be the ghost of a Mexican woman whose child was taken away by a vindictive white husband who cheated her out of her business by tarnishing her reputation with false rumors.

Cariña de la Cruz, the owner of a professional laundry service, haunts Juliana until her descendants are located in the present. Juliana recovers her sense of self as she reconstructs Cariña's life, just like Alex reclaims the legacy of Rosalinda. The past returns to the present through these ghostly figures who "demand a reckoning for a message that went unheard or was ignored" (Coverley 2020, 5). The sisters liberate

a future by freeing the ghosts from the past: ghosts are neither present nor absent and thus suggest a temporal dislocation as they face backwards and forwards. With money garnered from the manufacture of bootlegged whisky (Lopez 2022, 295), Rosalinda had set up the "Sociedad de Mexicana Señoras y Señoritas [sic]" (Lopez 2022, 260) to loan money to women who took charge of families and communities in the absence of Mexican traqueros, hired to build the railroad after the Chinese Exclusions Act of 1882. Families followed immigrant workers to Freedom, "then those families would invite their compadres, and pretty soon, you've got chain migration connecting a little village in Guanajuato, where our family is from, to a growing Mexican immigrant community in Kansas. They all knew each other, they relied on each other, they were all compadres y commadres [sic], sharing food, resources, childcare, and pride of culture" (Lopez 2022, 182). Juliana goes on to establish a nonprofit fund to help enterprising women. Again, in this series, the couple chooses to relocate in order to serve the community by recuperating family bonds on their own terms: Freedom, the name of the town, is significant because choice and possibility are motives for migration and settlement.

Third-generation Latinx characters may belong politically to the American polity, but they are subjectively a racialized other. Juliana embodies this phenomenon. She is the "Pride of the East Side" who adopts the name Gillian, wears green contact lenses, dyes her hair blond, has surgically altered the "wide bridge" of her nose and has married into a white "pure blood" Boston family (Lopez 2023, 203). Upon her return to Freedom, she struggles to recover her inner "bruja," a cultural symbol that mixes "Mexican paganism, Spanish Catholicism, and American self-determination" (Lopez 2023, 59). The bruja is less a witch than a worldview, described by her mother as a crossroads:

> You are where everything meets: Mexico and the United States, big city and small town, math and logic, wealth and poverty, the masculine and the feminine, devotion to la familia and admiration for the outside world, the logical and the spiritual. You've felt pulled in two different directions your whole life but you've never needed to struggle to choose one spot over another; you are the doorway. So is La Virgen. You two are made for each other. (Lopez 2023, 207)

Gillian has followed all the rules as defined by that (white) world, convinced that she has freely chosen to follow them, yet returns feeling "cursed" for having failed to live up to those expectations. She grows back into her name, Juliana, as she revisits the past to track the history of the buildings along Milagro Street, making place with others by materializing their history in a mural painted by the hero and the community, the creation of library boxes for children (Lopez 2023, 218), the repurposing of old railroad ties to create walls and benches in Loretta's, where the outside bar is a red boxcar like the ones that had served as homes for the families of Mexican immigrants (Lopez 2023, 83). Creating the new with the remnants of the past consolidates their historical claim to place by making visible their uninterrupted presence in the US. Memories and emotions are layered and superimposed: both heroines return to places that elicit negative and positive feelings as they reconnect

with family and a past associated with specific familiar buildings, geographies and landscapes, navigating the internal and external conflicts which can only transpire in Milagro Street, a unique place which, they realise, is a "caring community," that is a local environment characterized by mutual support, public space, shared resources and local democracy (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 38). *Full Moon Over Freedom* and *After Hours on Milagro Street*, like the other novels, describe how the younger generations accept the need for care as an ethical orientation in personal and public life, not as the creation of something new but as a readaptation of their cultural heritage and practices of survival; indeed, resilience and adaptability are tools worked by their inventive ancestors to overcome hardship. Just as they repurpose old buildings and materials, they reclaim and restore local *saberes* which constitute their intangible heritage, shared between generations.

Nationhood is fundamental in Natalie Caña's series about the Boricua community in Chicago because of Puerto Rico's political status as an unincorporated territory of the United States. The MillenniGenZ generations are proud of their grandparents' and parents' political nationalism, but their sense of belonging is rooted in the US mainland and expressed as cultural nationalism (Duany 2002). *El vaivén*, Puerto Rican transnational circular migration between the continental US and the island, complicates the relationship between territory and identity and ushers in what Jorge Duany has called "mobile livelihoods" (2002, 222)[3]. The series depicts this dynamism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of different locations in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighbourhood, as characters are constantly on the move between houses, parks, gyms, hospitals, senior care facilities, schools, offices, businesses, community centers, alleys, sidewalks, kitchens, bars, and to and from Puerto Rico itself. Mobility itself is constitutive of place because it creates and sustains relations between people as they go about their everyday lives. In contrast to the other two series, culture is "more about routes than roots" (Cresswell 2006,1); routes are established and sustained through the reiteration of everyday practices of mobility.

The transition from one (political) identity to another (cultural) is materialised in the transformation of El Coquí in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, in which the heroine, Kamilah Vega, takes over the family-owned restaurant established by her grandparents:

> El Coquí had been the hub of their family since its founding in 1979. Every holiday and almost every milestone was celebrated here. The restaurant had seen the most lively parties to the most solemn memorials. It was the most stalwart family member: a pillar of kinship offering a sense of self and comfort and belonging to everyone in the family. (Caña 2022, 38)

[3] "Mobile livelihoods" refers not only to the crossing of geopolitical borders, but to the movement "along the edges of cultural borders, such as those created by language, citizenship, race, ethnicity, and gender ideology" (2002, 222).

El Coquí has also been a hub for the Boricua community because "no one did Puerto Rican food better than Abuela Rosa Luz. And because no one entertained more than Abuelo Papo and his salsa band, Los Rumberos" (Caña 2022, 20). At the beginning of the novel, the business is about to fade "into nothingness" (Caña 2022, 22) because the previous generation has failed to adapt to a changing customer base: Kamilah's modern American cuisine is described as "*bougie* food" by her mami (Caña 2022, 17; italics in original). The business has stagnated because her parents have simply replicated their own parent's practices, but her approach is different: "It's not about catering to any one group of people, Papi. It's about making sure everyone who comes here feels welcome and valued and that they leave feeling happy and satisfied. All we have to do is update the menu and give the place a face-lift" (34). Kamilah associates her cultural identity not with the nation but with an aesthetic and an atmosphere, replacing national symbols with a "feeling of Viejo San Juan" (Caña 2022, 196). Originally, the venue was decorated with flags and Puerto Rico's mascot, a native frog, together with palm trees, a neon sunset mural, a group table shaped like the island, and

> the entire left side of the building's exterior was a mural of a cartoon coquí frog waving the Puerto Rican flag, in case people weren't sure what they were. Abuelo like to call it branding, but they should be honest: it was a brightly colored and tacky hodgepodge of kitsch. Back in the day, customers had loved it, but those were also the same people who'd put huge metal Puerto Rican flags across Division Street and named it Paseo Boricua. (Caña 2022, 35)

Kamilah has sacrificed her dream to attend culinary school in Paris to fulfill the promise made to her dying Abuela that she will keep the business afloat, her future hence "tied irrevocably to El Coquí" (Caña 2022, 37). Her commitment to protecting her legacy from gentrification is evidence of her love for family, community and hero.

Both Kamilah and Liam, the male protagonist, are battling on two fronts: against their (grand)parents' reluctance to adapt to inevitable urban transformation driven by a combination of changing consumption patterns, demographics and the interests of property developers. El Coquí centres social interaction in the sequels, confirming Caña's belief that they are about "the essence of community and the ways we, not only, affect it as individuals, but how it affects us in return." Referring specifically to *A Dish* in an interview, "the story became about how we have the tendency to base our value off our communities (whether a neighborhood or a family) and how we serve them" (Caña 2023).

This experience is explored through the effects of everyday encounters, trajectories, activities, practices, code-switching that take place in an area bounded by culture and the built environment. Place is meaningful to the people who come together in both harmony or conflict and gives rise to different types of attachment, involvement and identification. The series deploys the childhood sweetheart/enemies to lovers tropes and intratextual references to reinforce the idea that longstanding social bonds are vital to weave a strong, local social fabric. The serial form is particularly apt at depicting the many "imbroglios of traces" involved in place-

making: the fictional social world is densely populated by secondary characters whose experiences of "lived emplacement" enrich the meaning of the neighbourhood. Intergenerational care is crucial here: the elderly, children (and pets) are cared for by all the family members, as are the local businesses and community services, but care work also ensures the continuity of social bonds that stretch back into the past and into the future as we move forwards in time from one novel to the next. This is true of all three series because rather than a depiction of individual development at odds with society, they trace the inevitable transformation of the self by virtue of the dynamism and versatility of the communities of resistance and care whose fate is willingly shared.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three series discussed offer three forms of emplaced sociality that counter the far-right dream of exclusionary white ethno-states in the US. *Vaivén* is, according to Duany, a culturally dense word that refers to the constant comings and goings of Puerto Ricans: "It implies that some people do not stay put in one place for a long period of time but move about incessantly" (2002, 14). This type of interconnectedness is mapped in the Vega series, in which a sense of belonging to a caring community is created by the constant movement of many characters within a bounded area; crossing paths and boundaries is constitutive of place. In the Milagro Street series, we see how the historic practice of *compadrazgo* is essential to the survival of a Mexican-American community in Kansas, as one character explains: "Technically, it means godparenthood. But what it represented in the colonia is the way Mexican immigrants turned their shared understanding of culture, food, societal rules, and religion into ties that bound them and made them feel safe in a foreign place. That 'family-hood' turned Miracle Street into Milagro Street. It created a unique, nurturing community that still exists today" (Lopez 2022, 190). Promenading and car cruising, the *paseos* in the Love & Tacos series are courting and cultural rituals connecting past and present in specific landscapes: feet and wheels, like farming and commerce, culinary and automotive art leave their mark on the land. The public nature of these cultural practices suggests that romantic love is not exclusive –between two people– but expansive and festive because the couples actively assimilate and share responsibility for their circles of care and resistance as they are simultaneously sheltered by them.

MillenniGenZ Latinx romance reacts to Trump's explicit portrayal of Latinx as a threat to the nation based on his "nativist nationalism, anti-immigrant policy agenda, and misogyny" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 151). As Flores-González suggests, young Latinx are made to feel like trespassers in places and spaces which are still constructed in exclusionary ways (32), so it is unsurprising that one response has been a return to places that are made safe for nonwhite communities by active

boundary-making, understood as a form of resistance to the encroachment of a normative white world.

Reviews sent to the author: 01/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 09/06/2026

WORKS CITED

Aldama, Arturo J., & Frederick Luis Aldama. 2020. "Decolonizing Latinx Masculinities. An Introduction". In *Decolonizing Latinx Masculinities*, eds. Arturo J. Aldama and Frederick Luis Aldama. 3-20. The U of Arizona P.

Anderson, Jon. 2015. *Understanding Cultural Geography. Places and Traces.* Routledge.

Boswell Book Company. 2023. "Natalie Caña Event for A Dish Best Served Hot." (November 1). Accessed 10 Feb 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPGjiTK8sZQ.

Canizales, Stephanie L., & Jody Agius Vallejo. 2021. "Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era." *Daedalus* 150(2): 150-164.

Caña, Natalie. 2024. *Sleeping with the Frenemy.* Mira.

Caña, Natalie. 2024. Post on *Threads*, October 30, 2024.

Caña, Natalie. 2023. *A Dish Best Served Hot.* Mira.

Caña, Natalie. 2023. "Interview with Natalie Caña, Author of A Dish Best Served Hot." Interview by Michele Kirichanskaya. *Geeks Out* (October 9). Accessed 12 Feb 2025. https://www.geeksout.org/2023/10/09/interview-with-natalie-cana-author-of-a-dish-best-served-hot.

Caña, Natalie. 2022. *A Proposal They Can't Refuse.* Mira.

Chabram, Angie, Natalia Deeb-Sossa & Yvette G. Flores. 2024. "Introduction." In *Testimonios of Care. Feminist Latina/x and Chicana/x Perspectives on Caregiving Praxis*, eds. Natalia Deeb-Sossa, Yvette G. Flores & Angie Chabram. 3-12. The U of Arizona P.

Chatzidakis, Andreas, Hakim, Jamie, Litter, Jo, Rottenberg, Catherine & Lynne Segal. 2020. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. Verso.

Cowan, Ben. 2017. "How Machismo Got Its Spurs—In English: Social Science, Cold War Imperialism, and the Ethnicization of Hypermasculinity." *Latin American Research Review* 52(4): 606–622.

Coverley, Merlin. 2020. *Hauntology*. Oldcastle Books.

Cresswell, Tim. 2015. *Place. An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell.

Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move. Mobility in the Modern Western World*. Routledge.

Duany, Jorge. 2002. *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move. Identities on the Island & in the United States*. The U of North Carolina P.

Flores-González, Nilda. 2017. *Citizens but Not Americans. Race & Belonging Among Latino Millennials*. New York UP.

Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole M. 2017. "Affective Communities and Millennial Desires. Latinx, or Why My Computer Won't Recognize Latina/o." *Cultural Dynamics* 29(3): 141–159.

hooks, bell. 2004. *The Will to Change. Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Atria Books.

hooks, bell. 2001. *All About Love. New Visions*. William Morrow.

Hurt, Erin. 2019. "Introduction." In *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. Erin Hurt, 1-24. Routledge.

Lopez, Angelina M. 2023. *Full Moon Over Freedom*. Harlequin.

Lopez, Angelina M. 2023. "Enjoy spooky season with Milagro Street series." *Angelina M. Lopez. Ferocious Stories*. (April 4). Accessed 5 Feb 2025. https://www.angelinamlopez.com/blog/category/Milagro+Street+Series.

Lopez, Angelina M. 2022. *After Hours on Milagro Street*. Carina Press.

Lopez, Angelina M. 2022. "Love on the Rocks: PW Talks with Angelina M. Lopez." Interview by Laura Martínez. *Publishers Weekly* (April 15).

Oliveras, Priscilla. 2022. *West Side Love Story*. Montlake.

Quintana albertson, Alana. 2025. *My Fair Señor*. Berkley Romance.

Quintana albertson, Alana. 2023. *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*. Berkley Romance.

Quintana albertson, Alana. 2022. *Ramón and Julieta*. A Jove Book, Berkley.

Rast, Raymond W. 2023. "The Spaces between the Buildings. Latine Claims on Space, Place, and Preservation in the Pacific Northwest." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*: 114(2–3): 86-104.

Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova. 2020. *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm. Intimate Citizenship Regimes in a Changing Europe*. UCL Press.

Sánchez-gonzález, Lisa. 2020. "The Hyperpatriarchal Games. Machismo and Its Discontents in Contemporary Young-Adult Latinx Literature." In *Decolonizing Latinx Masculinities*, eds. Arturo J. Aldama & Frederick Luis Aldama. 199-212. The U of Arizona P.

Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. U of Minnesota P.

Seamon, David. 2025. "Understanding Place as Lived Emplacement. The Example of American Novelist Daniel Mason's 'North Woods.'" *Lo Squaderno. Explorations in Space and Society* 72 (nov): 23–26.

Seamon, David. 2018. *Life Takes Place. Phenomenology, Lifeworlds and Place Making*. Routledge.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2000. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Penguin.

Wachs, Faye Linda & Mary Kunmi Yu Danico. 2023. "Latine and Asian American MillenniGenZ. Who Are They and What Are They Thinking." *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* 9(2): 1-16.

UN/HAPPY NARRATIVES: RE-ORIENTING THE ROMANTIC IMPERATIVE IN REBECCA K REILLY'S *GRETA & VALDIN*[*]

Paloma Fresno-Calleja
University of the Balearic Islands

Abstract

This article explores *Greta & Valdin* (2021), the literary debut of Māori author Rebecca K Reilly. The novel tells the story of the Vladisavljevics, a family of Russian and Māori descent and focuses on the romantic conflicts of their two youngest siblings, Greta and Valdin, as they struggle with professional frustrations and negotiate intersecting identity issues and family dramas. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's exploration of happiness (2010) and on her articulations of the feminist killjoy figure (2017; 2023), I argue that it is possible to narrate hopeful stories which envision optimistic endings for the characters while rethinking the imperative of happiness articulated in conventional romantic narratives. I read Reilly's novel as an un/happy text that critically engages with and reorients normative constructions of happiness and as a decolonial, queer and killjoy intervention which opens up a space for the unhappy family stories to emerge, while granting its protagonists with a happy ending. Finally, I argue that the novel vindicates the reparative value of love in all its forms, presenting the family not so much as a source of unhappiness, but of joy and protection.

Keywords: Rebecca K Reilly, Māori Literature, Romance, Love, Un/happiness, Queer Identities.

NARRATIVAS IN/FELICES: LA REORIENTACIÓN DEL IMPERATIVO ROMÁNTICO EN *GRETA & VALDIN* DE REBECCA K REILLY

Resumen

Este artículo explora *Greta & Valdin* (2021), debut de la autora maorí Rebecca K Reilly, que narra la historia de los Vladisavljevic, una familia de origen ruso y maorí, centrándose en los conflictos amorosos y profesionales de los hijos menores, Greta y Valdin y la negociación de su identidad interseccional. A partir de las teorías de Sara Ahmed sobre la felicidad (2010) y de su articulación de la figura de la feminista aguafiestas (2017; 2023), argumento que es posible narrar historias esperanzadoras con finales optimistas y, a la vez, replantear el imperativo de la felicidad propio de las narrativas románticas convencionales. Planteo que la novela ha de leerse como obra in/feliz que critica y reorienta construcciones normativas de la felicidad y como una intervención decolonial y queer que permite narrar historias familiares infelices y mantener el final feliz. Finalmente, argumento que la novela reivindica el valor reparador del amor en todas sus formas, presentando a la familia no como una fuente de infelicidad, sino de amor y protección.

Palabras clave: Rebecca K Reilly, literatura maorí, ficción romántica, amor, in/felicidad, identidades queer.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.05
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 99-117; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed links the social imperative to be happy with restrictive and normative discourses of whiteness, heterosexuality or national identity. This "happiness duty," as Ahmed calls it, is "a form of world making ... often used to justify oppression [and] to redescribe social norms as social goods" (2010, 2) as it entails orienting subjects to specific life goals and achievements. The very hope for happiness –Ahmed argues– means we get directed in specific ways, as happiness is assumed to follow from certain life choices and not others" (54). The pursuit of this happiness duty can thus become coercive, particularly for those whose way of life does not adjust to what is considered socially good or acceptable, whose choices are oriented in different directions and who, as a result, are excluded from the promise of happiness in the terms that are conventionally established by society. The "happy family" –Ahmed contends– has been traditionally understood as necessary for the achievement of a happy life, "a myth of happiness, of where and how happiness takes place, and a powerful legislative device, a way of distributing time, energy and resources" (45). Through a discussion of the happy family, Ahmed goes on to explore three key figures who are excluded from the promise of happiness or marginalised from its constraining scripts: feminist killjoys, unhappy queers and melancholic migrants (2010, 49). These "troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy" (2010, 17) are the figures who "get in the way" (2023, 1) of happiness by speaking up and at the same time are alienated from its promise.

The feminist killjoy[1] –on which Ahmed has written profusely (2010; 2017; 2023)– embodies the purpose of feminist consciousness as a force that interferes with the joy and complacency of heteropatriarchy. The history of feminism, Ahmed argues, is the history of killing joy, standing in the way, troubling the gendered scripts of happiness (2010, 59), which are sustained on the rules of domesticity and its gendered division of labour as personified by the happy housewife. The feminist killjoy speaks up to question normative fantasies of happiness and is perceived as threatening to "what is deemed by some to be necessary for happiness: a belief, a practice, a way of life, a social arrangement" (2023, 16). The "unhappy queer" is the name Ahmed uses to refer to those who do not adjust to the narrow scripts of heterosexuality, also imbricated into traditional heteropatriarchal family structures. The archive is full of unhappy queer figures who are excluded from heteronormative happiness scripts; but in her work Ahmed argues for the mobilisation of queer unhappiness as a political force to achieve recognition without reproducing the social rules and family structures of happy heterosexuality (2010, 114). The "melancholic

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

[1] Ahmed's original concept of the feminist killjoy has been refined and adapted to include various agendas and perspectives and has now given way to various theorisations of the ethnic, black, indigenous, queer, trans or disabled feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017, 267).

migrant" disrupts another form of happiness: that of the migrant/minority/ethnic family. For the migrant, national identification comes at the cost of leaving behind their traditions and assimilating into the happy nation. Unlike the melancholic migrant, who is stuck in the past, the happy migrant forgets about the experiences of displacement or colonial history and takes up the "happiness duty" (2010, 130) which promises happiness "in return for loyalty to the nation" (22). What these killjoy figures have in common is their willingness to cause unhappiness, that is, to raise their voice "whenever there are difficult histories to bring up" (267) in order to generate "new horizons, ... alternative ideas of happiness" (77). Ahmed's project is then not about refusing happiness, but about mobilising unhappiness as a political tool in order to raise "our awareness of *how much there is* to be unhappy about" (223; italics in original) so that we can envision "a world in which things can happen in alternative ways" (233).

In this article I build on Ahmed's theorisation of happiness and on the role of these unhappy or killjoy figures in relation to *Greta & Valdin* (2021), the successful and widely-acclaimed literary debut of Māori author Rebecca K Reilly (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Rehua Ngātiwai ki Aotea).[2] *Greta & Valdin* tells the story of two Māori-Russian queer siblings in their late 20s, struggling with unrequited love, unrewarding or poorly-paid jobs and a caring but unconventional multi-ethnic family, the Vladisavljevics, formed by their Māori mother, Betty, their Russian father Linsh, and a large cast of secondary characters of various backgrounds.[3] In line with the aforementioned ideas, I contend that Reilly's novel can be read as an un/happy text that critically engages with and reorients normative constructions of happiness. The novel disavows the conventional scripts of happiness by exploring stories of queer, indigenous, racialized, migrant and neurodivergent characters; in fact, Reilly dedicates the novel to "the colonised, queer, trans, ace, and intersex people, and the hot autistic community" (Acknowledgements) –the troublemakers or killjoy figures who are so often excluded from the promise of happiness. As an un/happy text, the novel opens up a space for the unhappy family stories to emerge, to "get in the way" (Ahmed 2010, 60) of the various normative social norms on which happiness supposedly depends. But *Greta & Valdin* is also, and primarily, a happy story which concludes by granting most of its characters an optimistic and hopeful ending, vindicating the reparative value of love and care in all its forms and presenting the family not so

[2] The novel received the 2019 Adam Foundation Prize in Creative Writing, the Hubert Church prize for the best first book of fiction at the 2022 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards and the 2022 Aotearoa Booksellers' Choice Award. Following its success in Aotearoa New Zealand, it has been translated into several languages and published internationally to wide acclaim.

[3] These characters include their paternal uncle Thony, married to Giuseppe (a businessman of Italian and Spanish background); Giuseppe's brother, Xabi, a Catalan man, and Valdin's former partner now living in Argentina; the siblings' older brother, Casper, and his family, a German woman also named Greta, and their two children, six-year-old Freya, and seventeen-year-old Tang; their grandfather Vlad, who lives in Europe, and other minor family members and friends.

much as a source of discontent, but of joy and contentment. The Vladisavljevics are depicted as givers and recipients of love, in itself a radical act, given the long record of unhappy stories of racism, homophobia, exclusion or marginalisation which have defined not only the family history, but also the wider histories of the communities to which they belong.

2. UN/HAPPY NARRATIVES

Reilly's novel is paradigmatic of the thematic and formal shifts which have defined Māori literature in the last two decades, as seen not only in the works of mature writers like Tina Makereti, Paula Morris, Alice Tawhai, Kelly Anna Morey or Whiti Hereaka, but also in the writing of emerging authors, such as Steph Makutu, Tayi Tibble, Becky Manawatu, Nic Low or Shilo Kino, who have produced increasingly diverse stories and ventured into formerly untouched subjects by confidently employing new formats and genres. In that sense, *Greta & Valdin* corroborates what Witi Ihimaera, one of the pioneer figures of Māori literature in English, has stated: that these younger writers are now telling stories which are "hybridised, hyphenated and intoxicatingly mixed up" (2015, 31) in their concern to explore "who they are rather than what they are" (28). This comment concurs with Tina Makereti's observation, in her overview of recent Māori fiction, that "Māori writers no longer grapple with the need to articulate their right to existence as distinct peoples, but instead enjoy the autonomy to decide how that distinctive existence may best be expressed" (2020, 1). Indeed, the characters in the novel show that "there is a wide and diverse spectrum of ways to live as Māori" (3) and are unapologetic about their various intersecting identities. This confidence, unheard of in previous generations of Māori authors, does not free them from experiencing discrimination or intolerance, but it does equip them with the tools to censure all forms of social injustice and to handle the aggressions they experience more resolutely. In sum, these are works which explore, following Ahmed, what it means to be *happily* Māori, that is happy and willing to acknowledge "the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity" (2010, 116), in this case the rules that dictate how Māori identity is meant to be understood and experienced.

Significantly, Reilly chooses to trouble the narrow lines of normativity and to engage with the Māori and queer agendas through a playful engagement with the tropes and conventions of what might be considered the "happy genres," and in particular of narratives which focus on the search and attainment of happiness through romantic love. Indeed, romantic narratives have been conventionally understood as bringing joy and comfort to their readers through the prerequisite of the happy or, at least, "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending," as encapsulated in the well-known definition of the Romance Writers Association of America (About the Romance Genre). This happy ending is often associated with personal fulfilment and affective healing because, as Kamblé, Selinger and Teo contend, "the genre has always placed value on the happiness of women and the opportunities for freedom and fulfillment offered them in terms of work and social inclusion, as well

as through romantic love" (2021, 5). But romance novels have also, paradoxically, been seen as sources of unhappiness. This concern was most clearly voiced by classical feminist critiques of the genre published from the 1970s (Greer 1970; Modleski 1982; Mussell 1984), which saw popular romance as responsible for complying with heteropatriarchal and heteronormative expectations, for perpetuating regressive gender roles and for being "damaging to women in all sorts of ways: economically, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually" (Teo 2018). Scholars working in popular romance studies, the field which looks at romance narratives in all their diversity and complexity as worthy of serious academic study, have also recognised that many romance novels continue to articulate problematic gender and racial representations (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo 2021, 5). In her recent discussion on the cultural prevalence of the romance story, *Happily Ever After* (2016), Catherine Roach largely sees these stories as reparative and healing for their readers, but also concedes that

> [t]he romance narrative becomes problematic if and when its stories imply that a woman must be a heterosexual wife and mother in order to be happy. Note that the problem is not with these choices *per se*. ... The problem is when these stances become norms that are enforced by the culture as more or less mandatory. (2016, 91)

Similarly, Erin Young recognises the evident racial bias of many romance novels, not only in their use of "heavily racialized" language and imagery, but also in their meagre depictions of "non-white characters in general, and of non-stereotypical representations specifically" (2021, 512). Authors, critics and readers alike –effectively acting as killjoy figures– have questioned the narrowness of the happiness scripts found in traditional depictions of romantic love, which has resulted in a rapidly changing landscape of romance fiction. Attending to readers' growing demand for more inclusive and diverse representations, authors from an increasingly diverse range of backgrounds have revamped the format to tell love stories which envision different types of relationships and forms of affective commitment which do not conform to the rules of marriage, heterosexuality or monogamy. They also criticise hegemonic, heteronormative or white-centric constructions of romantic love and populate their novels with characters who have historically been absent from or marginalised in happy stories and who are now granted the right to reclaim joy, rather than suffering, as a feasible ending (Pryde 2022, xiv). When asked about her novel's happy outcome, in fact, Reilly explains:

> [m]y intention was not to show a happy ending as such, but a not-horrible ending for my two protagonists. [I]n the queer community and in the Maori community we've got enough media where something cooked happens to the characters right at the end. This is not a book where people are drowning or going to jail or revealing they're actually straight-engaged to someone else at the end. ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.)

Although *Greta & Valdin* cannot be categorised as a romance novel, romantic love plays a crucial part in the narrative, and so I read it in the light of the

aforementioned debates on the changing face of romance fiction, the increasingly diverse depictions of romantic love in contemporary narratives and media and, as previously mentioned, as evidence of how young Māori authors are pushing established thematic and formal boundaries and daring to engage with (happy) topics through generic conventions which have so far been seen as unfitting for the more pressing (unhappy) political issues which have defined Māori literature in the past. Indeed, the novel proves, as Witi Ihimaera and Tina Marketi argue in their introduction to *Black Marks on the White Page*, their edited collection on Oceanic writing, that Māori and Pacific writers are going "beyond the edges of what is expected of Oceanic writing" (2017, 13), geographically, thematically, generically and formally.

Certainly, *Greta & Valdin* offers a fresh, witty and quirky depiction of the lives of young people in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and liberally employs ingredients from various recognisable narrative formats. Since several characters study or work at the University of Auckland and a large part of the action takes place on campus, the novel can be read as a campus novel of sorts, but because of its portrayal of queer identities, the novel has been primarily classified as LGTBQ+ fiction. The narrative foregrounds the romantic dilemmas of the siblings, not in the form of the classical and often tragic "coming out" narratives –Greta and Valdin are both openly queer and feel accepted and loved by their families–, but in its lighter and humorous treatment of their search for love. Resembling the growing number of millennial fiction depicting young and sad women facing anxiety, apathy and unease (Fuller & Miller 2025), the novel opens by providing evidence of the unhappy love lives and existential dilemmas of the siblings, but these are narrated through a combination of humour and pathos. Greta is in love with Holly, a fellow tutor in the English department, who has been taking advantage of her, asking her to teach her tutorials and mark her papers and who, as Greta finds out in one of their meetings, already has a girlfriend. On his part, Valdin has been experiencing a period of anxiety and depression; he has quit his university job and his career as a physicist, and has finally come to realise that he is still in love with Xabi, his ex-partner, who is now living in Argentina. Furthermore, and in line with the reassessment of stereotypical representations of neurodiversity and mental health conditions in contemporary fiction and popular culture (Freeman Loftis 2015; Hesse 2025; Trostle 2025) and with the growing calls for the inclusion of neurodivergent characters, the narrative also works as an honest and full disclosure of Valdin's struggles with OCD as he recalls how this condition has affected his life and relationships. The action nevertheless advances optimistically to show that Valdin finally manages to overcome his fears of commitment and to openly express his feelings for Xabi, while Greta finally forgets Holly and finds love with Ell, a caring woman who understands and supports her.

Because Reilly narrates their protagonists' journeys towards their happy endings resorting to generous doses of humour, *Greta & Valdin* has also been read as a romantic comedy with connections to both classical and contemporary varieties of the genre. A reviewer mentions that in this novel "[q]uintessential rom-com meets the delicious family sprawl of a Russian classic" (Te Herenga Waka); another one describes the novel as possessing "the sophistication of a Shakespearean comedy" (Penguin) because, as in the classical plays, the multiple subplots concerning several

members of the family are solved in a final group scene which concludes with marriage and the restoration –here, the reorientation– of order. *Greta & Valdin* also plays with elements from the recognizable chick lit format, women's novels featuring young protagonists in urban locations, juggling personal and professional conflicts in their quest for self-fulfilment. Chick lit novels are essentially coming of age narratives, in which the protagonist narrates her problems through an informal, humorous and confessional tone, and where readers witness the maturation of the heroine and her attainment of happiness, often, although not exclusively, in the form of romantic love (Missler 2017, 31). *Greta & Valdin* is indeed an urban novel (it is set in Auckland, New Zealand's largest and most cosmopolitan city), it employs a confessional and humorous tone (by alternating chapters entitled "G" and "V" and narrated Greta and Valdin in the first person), and it traces the emotional development of the two siblings, as they juggle work, romantic disillusionment and family problems. That Reilly is playfully employing some of these elements is evident when a love-struck Valdin proclaims, after breaking-up with Xabi, that "[i]t's time for a new chapter and a new me. I'm not going to be worrying about men anymore. I'm going to be focused on my career, like a woman in a movie from the 1990s" (64).

The jacket design[4] visually encapsulates Reilly's blending of romance, humour and social critique, by combining the pink background –the recognisable pastel tones often employed to market women's fiction– with the sharper greenness of the limes, a visual cue of its caustic and acid humour. The choice of a torn mesh bag unable to hold the limes suggests the ways in which the novel both contains and exceeds various thematic and narrative conventions; that is, the ways in which, in a truly killjoy fashion, the narrative borrows and then transgresses specific formulae without forsaking its deep engagement with the depiction of love and its transformative effects on the characters. Indeed, this book is primarily about love in its multiple varieties. Reilly has explained that she enjoys "thinking about how love works and how people relate to one another, what sort of forms that can take, how far it can stretch" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.). The novel depicts love between siblings, between parents and children, friends and relatives, but also romantic love as experienced by homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual characters, in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships across various ethnic, national, age and class divides. Although Greta's and Valdin's respective love stories unfold separately, the different narrative strands concerning the siblings and other family members converge at the end of the novel, as the plot moves towards a final family gathering in the form of a very idiosyncratic wedding, several unexpected (romantic) reunions, and the fulfilled promise of happiness for the protagonists.

[4] I refer here to Clay Smith's design for the 2021 hardcover edition of the novel published by Hutchinson Heinemann. The international editions present variations of the original cover, but generally maintain the colour palette and the motif of the limes, in reference to the ones Valdin buys for Greta in the novel.

Considering the unique features of the novel and the centrality of love in the narrative, I propose to discuss *Greta & Valdin* as an un/happy novel. I use this term, rather than more restrictive generic labels or definitions, to argue that it is possible to narrate hopeful stories which envision optimistic endings for the characters while rethinking the imperative of happiness articulated in conventional romantic narratives. I show how the narrative maximises the potential of romantic tropes and conventions to decolonise traditional approaches to the depiction of romantic love and the structures of privilege they uphold and to project horizons of happiness for its characters which vindicate the power of love beyond such limiting scripts. In the following sections, I explore how *Greta & Valdin* puts some of the above-mentioned generic conventions to use –or rather to "queer use." This is the expression Ahmed uses "to refer to how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended" (2019, 199). On the one hand, Reilly expands the focus on romance to explore the reparative possibilities of the unhappy family stories of colonialism, displacement, racism and loss which often integrate the migrant, queer and indigenous archives. In this task, Greta and Valdin act as killjoy figures willing to call out the various happiness myths that condition their lives and those of their families, as discussed in the next two sections. On the other, the narrative clearly gears the characters towards forms of happiness which involve various forms of love. Thus, in the last part of the article, I consider how Reilly queers the happy ending, imagining joyful and hopeful outcomes for non-normative individuals, families and communities.

3. MYTHS OF HAPPINESS, KILLJOY TRUTHS

Although *Greta & Valdin* is structured around the protagonists' stories of romantic disillusionment and the eventual resolution of their love dramas, these amorous conflicts are played out against the background of complex family histories and personal identity struggles. The novel offers extensive commentary on social issues, often in the form of sardonic observations made by the siblings, who vocalise their unhappiness with the legacies of colonialism and the pervasive structures of racism, sexism, precarity and inequality they encounter daily. As killjoy figures, Greta and Valdin "expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy" (Ahmed 2010, 65) and elaborate "killjoy truths," insights though which the protagonists expose the happiness myths defining their social reality: "[A] killjoy truth [Ahmed explains] is clear and striking, even obvious. The obvious is often obscured by happiness" (2023, 261).

The chapters narrated by Greta unfold around her life on campus where she experiences the unhappiness and precarity of academic life for postgraduate students. Adding to her realisation that Holly has been manipulating her, Greta's worries are more specifically about her bleak prospects once she finishes her degree. Greta is unsure about how her MA thesis on Russian literature is progressing, she fears her tutoring hours will be reduced due to budget cuttings, and she ponders constantly on which career paths will be available to her:

> I stay up all night doing government careers aptitude tests that tell me I'm best suited to being an actor or playwrights. The job opportunities are described as *poor* and the pay starts at *zero*. I can't retrain as a lawyer because I've nearly used up my lifetime limit on student loans. I can't be a viral internet sensation because I'm over twenty-five. (208; italics in original)

Leaving the final comic remark aside, Greta's worries are genuine. She repeatedly refers to her meagre bank balance, condemns the government's removal of postgraduate allowances, and resents her lack of economic independence, which forces her to rely on her brother to pay for the flat they share in the city and even for food. The novel's discussion of precarity and anxiety linked to campus life and postgraduate research aligns closely with the shifts that scholars have identified in millennial campus fiction and its depiction of young academics "with little chance for a better future" (Williams 2022, 14). More specifically, it criticises the widening economic and social disparities that have come to define contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand (Rashbrooke 2021), in turn reflecting the pervasive legacies of colonialism which continue to be materialised in the systemic disadvantages in health, housing, income and education experienced by Māori and Pacific ethnic minorities.

Greta & Valdin can also be read in the light of contemporary novels which queer the 'straight' and heteropatriarchal trajectories of classical campus fiction (De Vido 2022, 362) by illuminating alternative experiences of academia beyond the white, male and middle-class perspective. Both Greta and Valdin, as well as their older brother Casper, who is also a lecturer at the University of Auckland, act as killjoy figures in that they denounce these injustices and voice their unhappiness with the system. Reilly's campus narrative can thus be read as responding to the worldwide calls to decolonise the University sector, which have also reverberated in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly in discussions about the underrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika staff (McAllister et al 2019; Naepi 2019) and students (Mayeda et al 2021; Webber & Watson 2024), or about the shortfalls in their equity and diversity policies despite the "language of benevolent inclusion" adopted by these institutions (McAllister 2019, 237). There are multiple references to how these structures of privilege condition the characters' lives; for instance, Greta attends a panel on diversity where the speakers "are all white" (256) and wonders "[h]ow much ... the people on this panel [are] getting paid" (257) at a time in which she fears that she will be unable to support herself if her tutoring hours are reduced. On his part, Casper has made it his cause to help Māori students navigate the multiple challenges they encounter in an educational system where they continue to be underrepresented by protesting against "the massive advantage that Pākehā students have coming into higher education" (53) and "lobb[ying] the government for money for Māori teenagers to get proper careers advice" (53). Greta herself comments on the ethnic bias that conditions the career choices of young Māori people, which she herself experienced a few years before:

> [o]nce, at school, I got called to the dean's office because I didn't show up to a careers meeting for Māori students, and they assumed I'd been wagging. It turned out my

> form teacher thought it was a mistake and threw the letter about it in the bin. I was just in maths trying to measure stupid triangles the whole time, when I could have been learning about joining the army or becoming a security guard. Everyone else came back to class with a keychain that said NZ POLICE. My life would be different if I didn't lose my keys all the time. (54)

Although Greta is signed up for the meeting because she is Māori, her physique –she describes herself as having "pale skin and black hair" (54)– does not adjust to her teacher's expectations of Māoriness, which paradoxically releases her from the obligation to attend. Greta's anecdote is conveyed through her mordant sense of humour, but her story is a poignant critique of the ongoing educational gap between Māori and non-Māori students in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. It also clearly illuminates the uncomfortable truths that shatter the happy narratives of egalitarianism (Bell 1996) and harmonious inter-ethnic relations on which New Zealand has constructed its distinctive identity historically by pointing at the many subtle and not so subtle forms of racism, ethnic bias and inequality that still condition the characters' lives.

The novel also comments on the messiness and complexity of identity as experienced by the protagonists. Whereas Greta has to persuade her workmates that she is indeed Māori even though she does not conform to the stereotype physically, Valdin is immediately categorised as Māori, although in fact he sees himself as having "many identities I don't entirely fit in with" (46). His well-intentioned liberal-minded workmates, for instance, ask him to perform "a quick karakia" (93) or prayer before getting on a plane, assuming his knowledge of Māori culture. Valdin cannot think of what to say, so a woman steps in and recites a karakia in his place "which I'm pretty sure –Valdin adds comically– is about food, not travelling" (93). When he visits his uncle Thony, who lives in a wealthy part of the city, Valdin explains that he feels self-conscious and fearful of being in the area and starts to walks faster "just in case the police come and take me away. Māori male, approx. thirty years, thin built, seen enjoying the shade of a colonial tree. Witnesses include a $3,000 Pomeranian and ten high-tech home security systems" (78). Greta also recalls the story of her older brother Casper when he becomes a teenage dad with a Pākehā girl and is considered unfit to bring up his son because "[t]he private-school girl's family thought that the baby was Casper's fault, that this was the kind of the thing Māori boys were always up to, getting good girls pregnant and messing up their futures. They said it would be best for the baby to go to a good home" (110). In exploring these different but interrelated experiences or racism, tokenism or ethnic bias, Reilly criticises the normative ways in which characters are allowed or expected to live and behave *as* Māori. The novel thus addresses the complexity of contemporary Māori cultural identity, which is not limited to "a particular world view, proficiency with the Māori language, darker skin tone, or any other outward markers of so-called authenticity" (Makereti 2020), but encompasses, as the novel amply demonstrates, very different ways of being Māori and experiencing this cultural identity.

Both Greta and Valdin elaborate their "killjoy truths" by stating what they are unhappy about, by turning "noticing" into a form of "political labour" (Ahmed 2023,

137). When the novel opens, Valdin has quit his job in the Physics Department at the University of Auckland after a mental breakdown. His new job is as a comedian and host of a television travel show in which Valdin soon gains a reputation for his controversial opinions on several issues, which are widely echoed on social media. Valdin uses his public platform to pose problems and, thus, he becomes the problem (Ahmed 2023, 18). One of these incidents –here recalled by Greta– happens during his visit to Queenstown, one of the country's luxury tourist destinations:

> He met with a real estate developer who showed him some incredibly expensive properties, which were all foreign-owned, and then they got him to interview a man who owned this enormous golf-course. And then V said: 'Do you know how many Maori children are living in poverty in this country?' Then they had an argument about whether it was possible to work your way up when you exist in a system that doesn't want you to succeed. Then V looked right into the camera and said he didn't want to talk to the Pākehā anymore. (300)

Valdin's reaction echoes the title of Reni Eddo-Lodge's book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2023), based on a 2014 viral post where she explains her frustration when bringing up the subject of structural racism and white privilege in Britain. Eddo-Lodge discusses the emotional disconnect of white people when faced with conversations about the difficult experiences of Black people (2022, ix), which they systematically deny or dismiss (2022, xi), and explores the ongoing exclusionary effects of this "invisible whiteness" (2022, xvi) whose pretensions of universality she sets out to dismantle (2022, xvii). Like Eddo-Lodge, Ahmed insists on the need to *see* whiteness as one of the key commitments of the killjoy figure (2023, 112). The novel illuminates the structures of white privilege that still dominate New Zealand society and condition not only the siblings' lives but also their family history, as discussed in the next section.

4. THE UNHAPPY FAMILY ARCHIVES

Readers and critics have praised Reilly's novel for its unique and refreshing take on diversity. In choosing to depict a vast and heterogeneous range of characters –Māori, Pākehā, Russian, German, Scottish, Spanish, or Catalan– the novel offers a unique and uplifting portrayal of Aotearoa New Zealand, still fairly uncommon in the fiction produced in the country, and illuminates the multiple trajectories which converge in Auckland, the country's largest and most demographically diverse city. But this picture of diversity is far from ideal. The narrative discloses the unhappy family histories, the troubled trajectories of the characters on both their Māori and Russian sides, tracing a genealogy of unhappiness which emerges in various exchanges and conversations. In her insightful review of the novel, Māori novelist Becky Manawatu argues that talking (kōrero) is one of the central themes of the book: "to kōrero ..., revealing yourself and others through talking" (2021). Reilly explains that the extensive use of dialogue between the characters was intended "to

break from the insularity of the tight first person" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.) which otherwise dominates the narrative. These conversations with friends and family members propel the action because they allow Greta and Valdin, who are facing moments of personal turmoil, to understand where they come from and how the past still conditions their present.

This is particularly evident in the case of their mother Betty. Reilly has mentioned that to a certain extent this novel is really about "the life of a woman who has a lot going on socially and emotionally" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.), but whose past we are only allowed to glimpse at through snippets of conversation. Indeed, Greta defines her mother as "a fairly mysterious woman" (108) and it is only when she goes to her for sentimental advice that Greta learns details and stories of her youth, including her former relationship with another man who is still "around" as a friend (100). This revelation increases Greta's anxieties because she realises that Betty might still be seeing this man, and she fears that this might put her parents' marriage in jeopardy. Valdin also learns about his mother's unhappy past, the rejection she encounters in her small isolated rural community when she moves to Auckland to pursue a career, her feelings of shame for wanting to be someone different, her fears when she becomes pregnant with Casper that she might be "an unfit mother" or "that someone would take my baby away because of my race" (252), and the economic difficulties she experiences after marrying Linsh. Betty's story reveals the deeply-ingrained colonial legacies which not only condition her identity and her choices as a Māori woman, but also have repercussions in how her children experience their Māori heritage because their knowledge of their whakapapa (genealogical connections) is limited. At one point in the novel, Greta is told by a friend of her mother's that she looks like Hiria Hine Te Huia, a name she has never heard before, and which she later finds out corresponds to her great-grandmother, of whom she knows nothing. Valdin and Greta never visit her mother's birthplace or meet their Māori relatives and are clearly out of touch with that side of the family. Casper, by contrast, is more acutely aware of this "huge hole in [their] whapapapa" (277). Like Betty, he experiences failure and guilt after being deprived of the right to bring up his first child because the mother's Pākehā family do not see him as a suitable father and thus, unlike his siblings, he has a strong desire to reconnect with both the Russian and the Māori sides of the family. In showing their different reactions, the narrative avoids making static assumptions about what constitutes Māori identity or how characters should experience it, but it does allow for the archive of unhappy stories to emerge and "get in the way" of unproblematic or celebratory understandings of the country's diversity, highlighting the shortcomings and deficiencies of official bicultural policies.[5]

[5] New Zealand is officially defined as a bicultural country, despite its multicultural demographics. From the mid-1980s, the country has implemented a bicultural governance structure aimed at consolidating the partnership between the Indigenous Māori population and the non-Indigenous Pākehā people, with a view of honouring what was first established in the Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti o Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the Māori tribes and of the British Crown.

The novel also unearths the unhappy stories of the Russian side of the family. Throughout the narrative, Valdin finds out that his father and his uncle Thony did not arrive in New Zealand as migrants, but as refugees, a fact that Linsh has kept secret over the years. In conversations with his uncle Thony and his grandfather Vlad, Valdin learns about their rushed journey out of the country, his grandfather's fears that Thony might be in danger for being gay, and their sad separation from their mother, who is still alive in Russia, but about whom Greta and Valdin know nothing because their father has never mentioned her. Valdin comes to realise, in fact, that "my imagined reconstruction of my father coming to New Zealand is completely illogical" (82). The family's painful history of exile and loss reveals the potential of another killjoy figure, what Ahmed calls "the melancholic migrant", who shatters the happiness myth of the happy migrant which Linsh has built for himself in attempting to comply with the image of the successful university professor and middle-class citizen. Thony and Linsh appear to comply with the "happiness duty", one which binds "migrants as would-be citizens ... not to speak about racism in the present, ... or of attachments that cannot be reconciled into the colourful diversity of the multicultural nation" (Ahmed 2010, 158-159), in their attempt to forget about their painful past. In discovering the parents' stories and allowing Greta and Valdin to understand their experiences of racism, exclusion, exile and dislocation, the novel mobilises unhappiness as a form of political consciousness about the past, but also as a tool to envision new horizons of happiness. Valdin's grandfather voices this possibility when he encourages him to "live your free life and feel indebted to me for every moment of it" (106). Armed with this newly acquired knowledge, the unhappy family stories that resurface throughout the narrative, the protagonists are now better equipped to face their quest for a happy life.

5. FAMILY EVER AFTER: QUEERING THE HAPPY ENDING

If the romance narrative can be simplified into the formula "find somebody to love, work through problems, be happy" (Roach 2016, 4), Reilly's novel aligns with that basic structure by fulfilling the promise of (romantic) love for the characters. The second part of the novel, with a faster narrative pace, moves forward towards the happy resolution as both Greta and Valdin learn to work through the various conflicts they experience throughout the novel. Greta consolidates her relationship with Ell, a Scottish postgraduate student she meets at the beginning of the novel, and becomes more assertive, so that by the end of the narrative she manages to break away from Holly's toxic influence. On his part, Valdin gathers up the courage to confront his real feelings for Xabi, travels to Argentina and declares his love, intent on forming a family with him and Ernesto, the child Xabi has adopted in Colombia. Although the resolution of the conflicts involves a marriage proposal, various declarations of love and the commitment to establish a family, Reilly's novel queers the happy ending by presenting diverse romantic, sexual and affective relationships as equally valid and, as a result, by expanding the normative identity categories on which the white heteronormative romance plot is constructed. The recognisable romance tropes are

thus used to reorient hegemonic construction of happiness as linked to compulsive heterosexuality, monogamy, and reproduction (Fletcher 2008; Kamblé 2014).

This reorientation is evident in the last chapters, which revolve around the hectic preparations for a wedding of which Xabi, who is on his way to Aotearoa New Zealand, still knows nothing about. Here Reilly exploits the comic potential of having all the characters gathered in the family home while helping Valdin with the planning, even though he has not formally proposed to Xabi yet. The pre-wedding scenes involve the baking of a wedding cake, a rushed trip to the registry office, and the organising of two pre-wedding parties, one Spanish and one Russian, even though as Greta comically notes, "V doesn't really identify as Russian and Xabi doesn't really identify as Spanish" (299). The gathering of all family members for the wedding allows Reilly to close the various narrative threads and to queer or subvert the conventional happy ending traditionally marked by the heterosexual and monogamous union. This is most evident in the marriage between Valdin and Xabi and their adoption of Ernesto; but also in the final revelation about Betty and Linsh's relationship. Greta's, who has been worried that her mother is having an affair with another man and might be divorcing her father, overhears an intimate exchange between her mother and her uncle's husband, Giuseppe, and then finds out through her brothers that Giuseppe and Thony have put an end to their relationship and that Giuseppe and Betty have been seeing each other. When she approaches her father, he lets her know this is a consensual arrangement based on their mutual understanding of each other's needs: "When you love someone –her father explains– you have to trust them and you have to believe that they wouldn't make choices that would intentionally harm you" (306). The novel thus introduces the topic of consensual non-monogamous relationships as a non-normative but viable form of happiness for the protagonists' parents, presenting Betty as a killjoy figure, in that she questions the myth of the happy housewife which Ahmed identifies as the cornerstone sustaining the idea of the nuclear family (2010, 51).

Ultimately, *Greta & Valdin* proves that, far from becoming a source of tension, repression or anxiety, the family provides love and protection for its members. Ahmed mentions that many white feminist consciousness novels "tend to involve freedom-from-family and its narrow scripts of duty and obligation" in contrast to feminist novels by black authors which often "involve freedom-to-family, as family is what is lost through unfolding histories of displacement and dispossession" (2010, 86). The novel shows how the stories of displacement and dispossession experienced by their parents affect the siblings, but also how by unravelling some of their secrets they become closer to their parents. The narrative advances by depicting their reorientation *to* family and by expanding the apparent initial focus on romantic love to other forms of love and care among family members, and by extension, to forms of social justice which involve affective equality (Lynch 2020) and happiness for all the characters. In the aforementioned review, Becky Manawatu defines *Greta & Valdin* as both "a book that loves people" –this is evident in Reilly's warm and caring construction of her characters– but also a novel which depicts people who are "remarkably capable of love" (2021). Indeed, the novel displays love in all its forms, between lifelong partners and newly formed couples, between members of the nuclear and extended

family, and between friends and members of the community. The narrative thus ascribes to bell hooks' proposition of choosing love as a radical form of relating to others, as "the core of all human interaction" (2006, 246), as a strategy to combat the "lovelessness" (248) on which systems of oppression and domination are sustained and as the practice of freedom. Reilly's characters remain acutely aware of how the normative scripts of happiness perpetuate structures of repression and oppression, and interrogate them by choosing love; the family provides them with the freedom they need to make their own choices and with a network of support to live happily in agreement with those choices. In her study on romantic narratives, Catherine Roach argues that romance is reparative for the reader because it allows her to imagine relationships based on mutual support, respect and trust and thus to fantasize with "the end of patriarchy" (2016, 180). The reparative quality of Reilly's novel not only resides in its bringing a joyful resolution to the story in the form of balanced and supportive romantic relationships for both Greta and Valdin, but also in the characters' struggles for the recognition and validation of other forms of loving and thus of *being* in the world. In sum, what Roach calls "[a] Society of Love," one in of "social justice, civil rights, power-with instead of power-over, an end to violence, and body pleasure and consent-based play of all sorts" (2016, 184).

6. CONCLUSION

Rebecca K Reilly's *Greta & Valdin* playfully engages with romance narrative patterns and motifs, but this does not work in detriment of its politics; on the contrary it allows the author to imagine a world in which romantic love (as well as other forms of love) allows the characters to thrive and experience joy without precluding their active involvement in locating the many sources of unhappiness that condition their lives. Thus, Reilly's un/happy novel troubles conventional scripts of happiness to trace the unhappy stories of racism and homophobia, sexism and exclusion, colonialism and dispossession, displacement and loss, which cannot and must not be forgotten, and it narrates Greta and Valdin navigating their personal conflicts aided by a solid network of support and care provided by an unusual but strongly-knit family structure and a supportive community of friends who choose love as the practice of freedom. The narrative leads its characters to an emotionally satisfying conclusion, showing love (in all its forms) as a matter of social justice and vindicating the *right* to (rather than the duty of) happiness.

Reviews sent to the author: 02/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 28/06/2026

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. 2023. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. Hachette UK.

Ahmed, Sara. 2019. *What's the Use?* Duke UP.

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke UP.

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP.

Bell, Claudia. 1996. *Inventing New Zealand. Every Myths of Pakeha Identity*. Penguin.

De Vido, Angelica. 2022. "Girl, Interrupted: Queering the Campus Novel." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 16(3): 361-381.

Eddo-Lodge, Reni. 2020. *Why I'm no Longer Talking to White People about Race*. Bloomsbury Pub.

Fletcher, Lisa. 2008. *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*. Ashgate.

Freeman Loftis, Sonya. 2015. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum.* Indiana UP.

Fuller, Emily & Alyson Miller. 2025. "'I am trying, you know': Reading Power, Politics, and the Body in Sad Girl Literature." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 19: 1-20.

Greer, Germaine. 1970. *The Female Eunuch*. MacGibbon and Kee.

Hesse, Alison. 2025. *Stereotypically Autistic?: Autism Portrayals in Young Adult Fiction.* Transcript Verlag.

Ihimaera, Witi. 2015. "Where is New Zealand Literature Heading?", *A New Zealand Book Council Lecture*. NZ Book Council.

Ihimaera, Witi & Tina Makereti. 2017. *Black Marks on the White Page*. Penguin Random House New Zealand.

hooks, bell. 2006 [1994]. *Outlaw Culture*. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2014. *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology.* Palgrave.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric M. Selinger & Hsu-Ming Teo. 2021. "Introduction." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge.

Lynch, Kathleen. 2020. "Affective Equality and Social Justice." In *Paradigms of Justice: Redistribution, Recognition, and Beyond* eds. Denise Celentano and Luigi Caranti. Routledge.

Makereti, Tina. 2020. "Indigenous Literary Studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Accessed 10 Feb 2025. https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/journal_contribution/Indigenous_Literary_Studies_in_Aotearoa_New_Zealand/13204274?file=25423004.

Manawatu, Becky. 2021. "Messy and Relatable. A Review of *Greta & Valdin.*" *The Pantograph Punch* (25 July). Accessed 12 May 2025. https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/greta-and-valdin.

Mayeda, David, Alan France, Tepora Pukepuke, Lucy Cowie & Marilyn Chetty. 2021. "Colonial Disparities in Higher Education: Explaining Racial Inequality for Maori Youth in Aotearoa New Zealand." *Social Policy and Society* 21(1): 80-92.

Mcallister, T.G, J. kidman, O. rowley, & R.H. Theodore. 2019. "Why Isn't My Professor Maori? A Snapshot of the Academic Workforce in New Zealand Universities." *Mai. A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship* 8(2): 235-249.

Missler, Heike. 2016. *The Cultural Politics of Chick lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation*. Routledge.

Modleski, Tania. 2008 [1982]. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women*. Routledge.

Mussell, Kay. 1984. *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*. Bloomsbury Academic.

N.A. 2022. "Invented People of Real Streets: An Interview with Rebecca K. Reilly." *Volume*. (4 May). Accessed 12 May 2025. https://volume.nz/volumebooks/2022/05/invented-people-on-real-streets.html.

Naepi, Sereana. 2019. "Why Isn't My Professor Pasifika? A Snapshot of the Academic Workforce in New Zealand Universities", *Mai. A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship* 8(2): 219-234.

Penguin Books. 2025. "Greta & Valdin." Accessed 10 Feb 2025. https://www.penguin.co.nz/books/greta-and-valdin-9781804946084.

Pryde, Jessica P. 2022. *Black Love Matters: Real Talk on Romance, Being Seen, and Happily ever Afters*. Penguin.

Rashbrooke, Max. 2021. *Too Much Money: How wealth disparities are unbalancing Aotearoa New Zealand*. Bridget Williams Books.

Reilly, Rebecca K 2021. *Greta & Valdin: A Novel*. Hutchinson Heinemann.

Roach, Catherine M. 2016. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana UP.

Romance Writers of America. 2025. "About the Romance Genre." Accessed 20 Jan 2025. https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2018. "The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*.

Te Herenga Waka University Press "Greta & Valdin". Accessed 20 Jan 2025. https://teherengawakapress.co.nz/products/greta-valdin-b-format?srsltid=AfmBOooiYBzo6XdMf8lFGgXUrIru5xwD_CXKCLmw96xxtrtbbou1d0EZ.

Trostle, Allyson. 2025. *Shattering Paradigms, Embracing Uncertainty: Female Mental Illness in Contemporary Fiction (2000-2020)*. PhD Thesis, U of Kent.

Young, Erin S. 2021. "Race, Ethnicity, and Whiteness." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Selinger & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Webber, Melinda & Penelope W. St J. WATSON. 2023. "Whaia te Angitū: Indigenous Māori Students' Career Aspirations —Gendered Stereotypes, Supports, and Barriers." *The Routledge International Handbook of Gender Beliefs, Stereotype Threat, and Teacher Expectations*, ed. Penelope W., St J. Watson, Christine M. Rubie-Davies, & Bernhard Ertl. Routledge.

Williams, Jeffrey J. 2022. "Millennial fiction meets the campus novel". *American Book Review* 43(4): 14-17.

LEVELLING UP ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE: INTERSECTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN LEANNE YONG'S *TWO CAN PLAY THAT GAME**

Astrid Schwegler-Castañer
University of the Balearic Islands

Abstract

This article examines Leanne Yong's young adult debut *Two Can Play That Game* as one of the few Australian romance novels to foreground an Asian-Australian character. The narrative unfolds through the popular enemies-to-lovers trope, following Malaysian-Australian aspiring-game-developer Sam Khoo's coming-of-age journey. Through close reading and analysis of reader reviews on the Goodreads and Storygraph platforms, I explore how the novel negotiates cultural specificities, gender, and sexuality within the framework of romance and its promise of a Happily-Ever-After. I argue that Yong expands the genre's inclusivity by centring a demisexual protagonist whose narrative challenges normative assumptions about intimacy and success. While the text reproduces certain binaries between "Asian" and "Australian" identities, it simultaneously interrogates stereotypes such as the "model minority" and the "fake gamer girl". Reviews highlight the representational significance of this approach, reflecting both the appetite for Asian-Australian protagonists and the genre's shift toward diversity.

Keywords: Asian-Australian Literature, Young-Adult Romance, Ace-spectrum Romance, Intersectionality, Demisexuality, Cultural Identity, Gaming Culture.

POTENCIAR LA FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA ASIÁTICO-AUSTRALIANA: REPRESENTACIÓN INTERSECCIONAL EN *TWO CAN PLAY THAT GAME* DE LEANNE YONG

Resumen

Este artículo examina la novela juvenil *Two Can Play That Game* de Leanne Yong como una de las primeras obras del género romántico australiano que sitúa en el centro de la narración a un personaje asiático-australiano. La narrativa sigue el proceso de maduración de Sam Khoo, una joven malasio-australiana aspirante a desarrolladora de videojuegos. Mediante una lectura atenta del texto y de reseñas en Goodreads y Storygraph, exploro cómo la novela negocia especificidades culturales, género y sexualidad dentro del marco de la narrativa romántica. Sostengo que Yong amplía la inclusividad del género al centrarse en una protagonista demisexual cuya historia cuestiona supuestos normativos sobre la intimidad y el éxito. Si bien el texto reproduce ciertas dicotomías entre las identidades "asiática" y "australiana", también interroga estereotipos como la "minoría modelo" y la "falsa gamer". Las reseñas destacan la relevancia representacional de este enfoque, reflejando tanto el interés por protagonistas asiático-australianos como el giro del género hacia una mayor diversidad.

Palabras clave: Literatura asiático-australiana, narrativa romántica juvenil, narrativa romántica en el espectro asexual, interseccionalidad, demisexualidad, identidad cultural, cultura *gamer*.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.06
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 117-135; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Reader responses to Leanne Yong's young-adult romance *Two Can Play That Game* (2023; henceforth *TCPTG*) show enthusiasm for the portrayal of Asian-Australian characters as well as for its female protagonist on the asexual spectrum. "I love how Leanne Yong represented an ethnic Australian family" (GR 40 2023),[1] reads one online review. These readers' reactions reflect two concurrent realities: the demand for Asian-Australian protagonists in romance, and the romance genre's ongoing shift toward greater diversity (O'Mahony 2021, 87). As Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo (2021) argue, contemporary romance provides a space for diverse authors to explore intersectional identities and offer a "utopian hope that a happily ever after ending is possible for everyone" (1). In this paper, I contend that Leanne Yong has written such an intersectional exploration of identity within the hopeful framework of romance, thus expanding Asian-Australian representation.

Historically, Asian-Australian authors have faced constraints tied to their labelling as minority writers, often expected to produce migrant or ethnic narratives (Graham 2013, 70), as well as having to contend with the burden of representation when writing about cultural markers that risk reinforcing stereotypes (Schwegler-Castañer 2025, 63). These pressures, compounded by industry discrimination and gatekeeping, have contributed to their underrepresentation in popular genres such as romance (Ali 2021, 325, 329; Teo qtd García Fernández & Fresno-Calleja 2020, 266). However, the diversification of the romance genre noted by Kamblé, Selinger and Teo (2021) is also apparent in the Australian literary landscape. The mainstream success in the United States of romance centred on East Asian protagonists –with works such as the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Helen Hoang's romance novel *The Kiss Quotient* (2018)– has helped create space within the English-language publishing industry for such narratives by demonstrating their commercial viability, despite their continued relative scarcity (Teo 2020, 2-3).[2] Romance by Asian-Australian authors appears to emerge in the 2020s in the wake of this development. In 2020, Birdie Song published *The Guy from the Flower Shop*, the first novella of her Somerville Stories, a series of contemporary romances set in Perth and featuring Asian-Australian characters. Then, in 2023, three novels marketed as romance by Asian-Australian authors were released, including the object of this study: Leanne

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

[1] In line with ethical considerations, reviewers have been anonymized and given an identifier based on their platform of publication and a number: GR for reviews on Goodreads, SR for reviews on Storygraph, and G&SR for identical reviews published on both platforms. Publication years were included whenever available.

[2] While not a romance novel, Gabrielle Zevin's bestselling *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* (2022) –which features a Korean-American male protagonist and explores themes of gaming and prejudice akin to those in *TCPTG*– might also have contributed to carving out space for *TCPTG*. Leanne Yong has expressed appreciation for the novel and its central idea that "a collaborative working relationship can be just as valuable as a romantic relationship" (qtd Lawn 2023).

Yong's *Two Can Play That Game* (2023), Saman Shad's *The Matchmaker* (2023), which centers on characters from the Pakistani diaspora in Sydney, and Ann Liang's young-adult (YA) romance *This Time It's Real* (2023), featuring Chinese characters in an international school in Beijing, followed a year later by *I Hope This Doesn't Find You* (2024), featuring Chinese-Australian characters. Also notable is the five-part YouTube series *No Ordinary Love* (Screen Australia 2022), which portrays the romantic reconnection between a Korean-Australian man and a Zambian-Australian woman. The web drama presents itself as a "love letter to K-Dramas," thus reflecting the global popularity of South Korean media and its contribution to the visibilization of Asian-centred romance (see Oh 2025).

This recent surge of Asian-Australian romance fiction is significant not only for the increased representation it entails, but also because the genre itself provides space for negotiating questions of identity. Romance narratives, with their focus on personal transformation and relational dynamics, have historically engaged with issues of gender and societal belonging. In the Australian context, as Lauren O'Mahony observes, romance novels have explored "the 'place' of women within the nation and its culture ... in a range of settings from colonial settlements of Australia to the cities, suburbs, farms, and outback of modern Australia" (2021, 90). This is especially the case for the YA subgenre of romance. YA novels are often characterized by a search for selfhood intersecting with questions of gender, class, culture and, for racialized characters, race/ethnicity (Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 22). Lana Zannettino's (2007) study of Australian young-adult novels featuring second-generation migrant minorities argues that these narratives interweave gender and class with the protagonists' efforts "to negotiate racialised and ethnic identities" across distinct cultural contexts (48-50). In such texts, coming-of-age is inseparable from this negotiation, which is resolved through the dynamic portrayal of identity as protagonists are ultimately "able to embrace their cultural heritage in a flexible third space" (54). Alice Pung's *Laurinda* (2014), for example, draws on her own adolescent experiences to critically depict the challenges of growing up in a multicultural Australian city in the 1990s, highlighting tensions between race, gender, class and family idiosyncrasies (see Schwegler-Castañer 2025).

YA fiction often incorporates autobiographical elements, functioning as a "highly symbolic device" through which both authors and readers negotiate cultural circumstances and personal agency, thereby "underscoring the diversity of childhood and contradicting any tendency to essentialize the 'ethnic' or 'Asian' subject" (Davis 2006, qtd Dong 2018, 149). Leanne Yong is no exception. She explains that the source of inspiration for her debut novel is two-fold: it is driven by her desire to see her own experience depicted in popular literature, and to question stereotypes in relation to her cultural and idiosyncratic specificities. She writes:

> As the daughter of Malaysian immigrants, I wanted to see my experiences reflected in a YA novel. But on top of that I also wanted to challenge the common narrative of the tiger parents who pressure their children to become high-achieving professionals. Growing up, my parents were always supportive. ... That said, I also wanted to

> explore the different kind of pressure that intersection of supportive parents and traditional Asian values brings. (n.d.)

Indeed, this interest in representation is also reflected in her biographical note, where she defines herself as "an Asian-Australian author of Singaporean and Malaysian heritage who loves writing the diaspora experience into contemporary and fantasy fiction" (2023, 375). While *TCPTG* is not fantasy but a YA romance, it does focus on the diasporic experience in a contemporary, post-2020 Brisbane setting. Albeit marketed primarily as romance, the narrative is akin to the coming-of-age narratives analysed by Zannettino since it is "analogous to entries in a personal diary" by dealing with "hopes, dreams, fears and desires [...] as well as the more typical adolescent concerns about 'fitting in' with peers, schoolwork, and relationships with friends and family" (2007, 48).

Written in first-person, *TCPTG* follows the story of Samantha Khoo (Sam), whose sexuality falls on the asexual spectrum. She is a second-generation Malaysian-Australian, like her love interest: Jaysen Chua (Jay). Their love story develops following the trope of the enemy-to-lover: Sam wants to become an indie video-game developer instead of going to university. To prove to her parents that she has a future in game development, she plans to attend a game design workshop. However, she loses that opportunity when Jay unfairly snatches the last ticket from her hands. When she threatens to reveal what he did to their "Asian Gossip Network," that is, their Singaporean and Malaysian communities, they decide to compete for the ticket in a one-on-one competition of classic video games. This competition is layered with Sam's struggle to reconcile her dream job with the internalized expectations she has about what "success" is, framed by her identity as an eldest daughter within her diasporic community.

Through a close reading of the text alongside reader reviews from the online platforms Goodreads and Storygraph, this paper examines how *TCPTG* engages with themes of sexuality, gender, ethnicity and cultural identity. The novel's intersectional approach emerges through Sam's negotiation of her identity as the eldest daughter of Malaysian immigrants in postcolonial Australia, her struggle with the pressures of success in a capitalist society, the challenges of being a woman in the male-dominated video game industry, and her experience of romance on the asexual spectrum in a hetero- and amato-normative[3] world (Vares 2021). By critically writing dominant tropes –such as the "model minority" and the "fake gamer girl"– in conjunction with non-normative traits, the narrative stretches conventional romance structures to make space for more inclusive representations. These intersecting dimensions illustrate the difficulties of living fully within normative frameworks, prompting

[3] Amatonormativity refers to the societal assumptions that prioritize long-term intimate relationships over other forms of connection. These intimate relationships are typically understood as "sexual, amorous and partnered" (Vares 2021, 10). The concept is closely linked to allosexuality, which is addressed later in this discussion.

critical reflection on norms such as national identity and the sexual components of romantic relationships.

The article is organised into two sections. I begin by examining Sam's sexuality which, although the most implicit aspect of the text, is key to understanding the novel as ace-spectrum romance fiction (ARF; Carter 2020). I then turn to Sam's experience as an Asian-Australian teenager navigating Australia's white, neoliberal, and patriarchal structures as part of her struggle for self-definition within the heroine's journey, which is at the core of romance fiction (Kamblé 2023, 13) and of Australian romance's historical engagement with women's identity and their place in the nation (O'Mahony 2021, 90). At the same time, this paper critically considers the novel's limitations, particularly its binary articulation of Asian and Australian identities, which reflects the persistence of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia beneath Australia's official multicultural discourse. Despite this tension, several online reviews suggest that readers find affirmation in Sam's story from diverse perspectives. As of December 4, 2025, *TCPTG* has accumulated 124 reviews across online platforms, namely 84 reviews on Goodreads, 19 on Storygraph, and 21 appearing on both.

2. "BUT THERE WAS NO KISS": REIMAGINING HEA AND INTIMACY IN ACE-SPECTRUM ROMANCE

Sexuality has traditionally been central to the romance genre. As Hannah McCann and Catherine Roach note, "[w]hether represented explicitly, metaphorically, or through mere discreet allusion, sex is an integral feature of the romance genre" because sexual satisfaction underlies the story's gratifying resolution in its "Happily Ever After" (HEA) (2021, 411). This means that romance narratives position sexual desire as fundamental to intimacy and romantic relationships,[4] reflecting broader societal views (Selinger 2022, 376). Recent scholarship, however, highlights emerging narratives that challenge this framing. Ellen Carter's "Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World" identifies a growing number of contemporary romance novels featuring protagonists on the ace-spectrum, that is, on the asexual spectrum. While these characters experience little or no sexual attraction, they "still yearn for romantic and emotional connection and their happily ever after" (2020, 1), desires with which they are forced to contend from an outsider position in "an allosexual (non-asexual) world" that treats sexual desire as normative and pathologizes asexuality (2020, 1). Carter notes that a large portion of ace-spectrum romance fiction (ARF) belongs to the YA and New-Adult (NA) subgenres, not accidentally, as these genres more readily accommodate a focus on the protagonist's discovery of their sexual orientation (2020, 7).

[4] See, for example, Jodi McAlister's analysis of the conversation as having "a deeply eroticised edge in heterosexual romance novels, [functioning] to build the intimacy between the characters" (2022, 125).

In *TCPTG*, Sam's story diverges from the pattern identified by Carter, in which sexuality is a central component of the ARF storyline. Sam's sexuality on the ace-spectrum is suggested, never explicitly labelled. Confirmation of her asexuality comes only through the author's annotation of the first three chapters, which she made available through her newsletter and where she acknowledges Sam's "ace-ness" and credits editorial encouragement for prompting her to explore it further (27). This approach contrasts with Carter's findings, where most novels (47 novels; 72%) make ace-spectrum orientations visible in the text, and only a minority (seven; 11%) reveal them through author commentary, mostly on social media (2020, 7). Most significantly, Sam's asexuality is never presented as a source of conflict between characters, not even as her relationship with Jay develops. Instead, it operates as a subtle marker of difference that reinforces her sense of being an outsider. This emerges in her inner narration. For instance, Sam reflects that she is unable to understand attraction based on physical appearance, not grasping how others can classify strangers as "'hot' or 'not hot'" (Yong 2023, 27). She is also indifferent toward casual sex. She narrates:

> I've never understood how people can want to have sex with someone based on their looks alone, despite ... attempts to explain it to me in the past. I've never had that fluttery feeling because someone's got a great face or body ... and I'm happy to remain blissfully ignorant. (171)

This feeling of exclusion becomes particularly visible in scenes with her Bengal-Australian best friend, Aneeshka, who easily navigates social dynamics that hinge on shared norms of attraction. At one point, when a group conversation turns to "hot gamers," Sam disengages, observing that Aneeshka "belongs here" while she cannot relate since she does not "understand how abs or legs or butts or boobs or faces can stir feelings in anyone" (317). The juxtaposition between Aneeshka's seemingly effortless belonging and Sam's quiet detachment illustrates how non-normative sexuality shapes Sam's experience through moments of social disconnection.

The non-centrality of Sam's ace-ness also shapes the romance arc: the relationship develops slowly, marked by minimal physical intimacy. Physical attraction appears rather late in the narrative –on page 219 of 365 and again on page 361– after both Sam and Jay have shared vulnerabilities and built mutual understanding. Sam describes the attraction as a "natural extension after seeing parts of who he is that he chose to reveal to [her]," feeling for the first time, when he touches her hand, "the butterflies, shortness of breath and strange physical reactions that Aneeshka claims to get when looking at 'hot' boys" (219). This progression suggests that Sam is demisexual, a term which denotes an orientation "halfway between sexual and asexual" where sexual attraction arises only after forming an emotional bond (McAlister 2014, 300; Vares 2021, 2). This may partially explain why her ace-ness is not central to the plot; her sexual orientation is not in conflict with the promise of a happy ending since attraction eventually does materialize, albeit as a consequence of intimacy rather than as the driving force of the relationship. As Carter notes, "[c]rafting a credible path to HEA is less challenging for authors writing demisexual or gray-

asexual characters since these orientations experience sexual attraction under certain circumstances" (2020, 9). Moreover, Sam's sexual-attraction arch is in consonance with what McAlister calls the romance genre's "governing paradigm" of "compulsory demisexuality," that is, the expectation that the female protagonist will experience "true sexual pleasure" with only one person, their one true love (2014, 300; see also Selinger 2022, 378).

However, the expectation of sexual satisfaction, which McCann and Roach describe as "inherent to the appeal of the genre" (2021, 411), does not necessarily hold true for *TCPTG*. In the novel, intimacy unfolds through a slow build-up culminating in minimal physical contact –limited to gestures such as hand-holding (219, 264-66; 350) and Jay's stroking Sam's back (354)– with only a vague suggestion of future physical intimacy, namely a kiss that might occur on a possible subsequent date as Jay makes her feel like she "could kiss him" (266). Notably, several readers expressed disappointment at the absence of such a kiss: "BUT THERE WAS NO KISS!! I just wanted one" (GR-14 2023; capital letters in original), "personally I could have done with a kiss at the end" (GR-38 2023), and "I do have one complaint though / All those pages and not one kiss?!" (GR-82 2025). These reactions illustrate the significance of romantic kissing, which is usually considered "the first sexual behavior that an individual engages in" (Thompson, Hill & Record 2023, 02), as an important element to achieve readers' satisfaction. It is the first kiss between the main couple, in particular, which often appears in mainstream media as an idealized, metonymic symbol that signals the HEA (10).

This absence of conventional romantic expressions through physical intimacy is spotted by one reviewer who remarks that, "[w]hile there aren't any obvious acts of romance between the two characters, the chemistry there is undeniable" (GR-21 2023), significantly conflating romance with sexual gestures by obviating non-physical acts of romance. Most remarkably, a reviewer fails to register Sam and Jay's relationship as romantic –interpreting it only as a future possibility, expressing that "[i]t was refreshing that relationships were kept out of the storyline" (GR-64 2024). This deviation from convention leads some readers to question whether the novel qualifies as romance. One reviewer argues it is "undeserving of the genre: romance in general" due to "only minimal tension and minimal romance to the plot" (GR-69 2024), while another offers a harsher critique, claiming it is "NOT a young adult romance like we are led to believe, more about Sam who did nothing but complain, about her situation, about her parents, about her game, about winning a scholarship, about her life... you get the picture!" (GR-58 2024; capital letters in original).

Yet, the lack of overt sexual satisfaction is also framed positively by other readers. For instance, one praises that the story "doesn't have over the top romance as you'd see in some YA novels" (G&SR-19 2025). Only one reviewer explicitly brings to light the link between romance and sexuality, highlighting it as unusual in a positive way, noting that "while [they tend] to like romances with a fair bit of steaminess, the slow clashing of personalities-turned-meeting of hearts, driven by ambition and playfulness rather than lust, was refreshing and so very enjoyable!" (GR-20 2023). In addition, some readers interpret Sam to be on the ace-spectrum

through the lack of physical intimacy, identifying her as demisexual before the author confirmed it, and appreciate this representation:

> Also, can we take a moment to appreciate Sam as a demi character? The way Sam explains her confusion over romantic attraction, but also how her romantic attraction unfolds is so well done. Because demiromantic/sexual is not well understood (or as discussed as other identities), we really need more demi characters in books and TCPTG is a great example of why that representation matters and how to do it well. (SR-15 n.d.)

That said, the implicitness of Sam's sexuality is regretted by some readers, as shown in the following review: "I would have love [sic] it more if the word demisexual was actually in the book" (GR-33 2023). Others, however, defend the choice, arguing that "Sam doesn't have to label or categorize that aspect of herself to make herself relatable" (GR-78 2025). This tension mirrors broader debates in ace representation. As Carter (2020) notes, authors often struggle with whether to explicitly name ace identities, fearing didacticism; a concern voiced by Vanessa North, a romance author who tweeted about regretting not labelling a demisexual character in her own work: "I knew, and wrote him that way, but didn't know how to address it without going didactic" (2016, qtd Carter 2020, 8).

By decentering sexuality as neither a source of conflict nor a core part of the HEA, the novel can be read as normalizing non-normative sexualities within broader narratives of belonging, challenging "the central love/sex nexus and its core value of sexual pleasure" (McCann & Roach 2021, 413). In this sense, the novel participates in what Carter identifies as a shift from a discourse of romance –centered on passion and the pursuit of the perfect partner– toward an intimacy discourse based on communication, friendship, and shared vulnerability (2020, 12). It has to be noted, however, that some readers interpret the absence of sexual depiction through the lens of purity culture, as reflected in reviews describing the story as "pure and wholesome" and labeling it as "clean," a term often associated with religiously-inflected purity norms (Adair 2020, 243). At the same time, the term "clean" also evokes "puriteen" discourses, a trend in which young people employ progressive rhetoric "to criticize pop-cultural texts (and their audience) that do not meet their personal 'moral' standards" (Kobus 2025, 230), in particular content they perceive as overly sexualized, and which thus does not necessarily encourage inclusivity.[5] Notwithstanding these readings, the depiction of Sam's sexual orientation has the potential to expand the genre's inclusivity and invites readers to question "patterns of intimate life within our predominately sexual society" (Carrigan 2012, qtd Carter 2020, 13), particularly when characters voice their non-normative views towards sex.

[5] See also Pande 2024 on intersection between purity discourse and race/ism in online spaces.

3. "SOOO RELATABLE!": WRITING RECOGNITION ACROSS IDENTITY AXES IN ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS

From as early as page 4, the novel weaves in details of Sam's second-generation Malaysian-Australian background. These cultural elements often appear subtly – similarly to the treatment of Sam's sexuality– as evidenced in the author's annotations on the first three chapters. One annotation, for instance, draws attention to the detail of Sam's and Jay's fathers playing badminton together as specifically "an Asian uncle thing" (annotated ver., 4), a nuance likely recognized as culturally-specific only by readers familiar with it. There are, however, many more instances when cultural specificities are made explicit, conceivably for the benefit of an anglophone readership presumed unfamiliar with Malaysian traditions. Another annotation identifies as autobiographical the passage describing a recipe invented by Sam's father "as a poor Malaysian student" (19). In the narration of this passage, Sam offers a linguistic explanation for calling her parents "Mummy" and "Daddy" as a young adult –"it makes much more sense in Canto" due to its inflection– while noting that it "becomes a bit weird around Westerners, who seem creeped out about it" (19). The explanation contrasts with recent trends toward leaving cultural specificities unmediated, as seen in Vivian Pham's first novel *The Coconut Children* (2020), a coming-of-age novel set in 1980s Cabramatta, which incorporates dialogue in Vietnamese without glossing. That said, the relative opacity or accessibility of such cultural references may owe less to deliberate authorial choice than to genre conventions in the case of *TCPTG*. Finally, Sam's self-conscious explanation for calling her parents "Mummy" and "Daddy" can also be read as gesturing toward the broader tensions at the heart of the story.

In contrast to Sam's demisexuality, the depiction of Asian-Australian identity is explicitly tied to the novel's central conflict, which is about Sam's grappling with societal expectations as a second-generation Malaysian Australian. Despite the book's cover, title and summary all highlighting the romantic aspect of the novel, the text focuses on Sam's dilemma regarding her future: Should she give up a scholarship to attend Queensland University of Technology in order to pursue her dream of becoming a video-game developer, risking failure and her parents' disappointment? Sam repeatedly articulates that her decision is shaped by her second-generation status. She feels that she cannot easily pursue a "risky" or unconventional career path in the same way as "*gwei lo*" (referring to white Anglo-Celtic Australians, often perceived as non-hyphenated Australians) who, she thinks,

> don't have parents who've migrated entire continents and struggled with a different lifestyle and culture, hoping to provide a life with more opportunities for their kids. They don't have an entire community looking to them as an example of what can be achieved with hard work. In order to break the mould, I have to be even more successful than all the gwei lo. (182)

This conundrum crystallizes the tension between cultural expectations and individual desire, situated within the specific contexts of diasporic identity and

Australia's video-game industry. It intertwines intergenerational pressures, the "model minority myth" (Walton & Truong 2023, 396), and prevailing notions of success, while also engaging with gendered dynamics in a creative, male-dominated field, further complicated by the video-game industry's relative lack of prestige.

As the eldest daughter, Sam has internalized the notion of *gwai* –a term connoting obedience and propriety, appearing 19 times throughout the novel (from chapter 2, page 13, to the penultimate chapter 29, page 352)– as in "gwai lui" ("good girl"; 164) or "gwai zai" ("good boy"; 13). This concept shapes her sense of responsibility toward her family and community. Although her parents do not impose rigid academic expectations, having never "been the type to expect straight A's" (37) and thus defying common expectations of Malaysian-Australian parental behaviour (see Voon & Pearson 2011; about Asian-Australian students in general, see Vialle 2013), Sam perceives achievement as a source of communal pride. She wonders whether maintaining an ethic of hard work allows her to claim a Malaysian identity despite her cultural distance from her parents' Malaysianness:

> Did it mean that even though I wasn't Malaysian in the same way my parents were, as long as I kept that spirit and worked hard and achieved all the things my parents (the "true" Malaysians) expected, I would also be Malaysian in my own way? I could still be the "good Malaysian kid", the pride of the community. (201–2)

These ideals echo the model minority stereotype of the deserving, hardworking Asian migrant discussed by Asian-Australian writers like Alice Pung (2009), Hsu-Ming Teo (2020), and Malaysian-Australian poet Omar Musa, who observes that, as Asian Australian, he is "positioned as a model minority ..., mythologized as 'working hard'" (qtd Vickery 2021, 222). This resonance between *gwai* and the minority model is made explicit when Sam reflects on her identitary attachment to the minority model. Sam asks herself: "I was always the model Asian kid. What am I, if not that?" (182). Leanne Yong's engagement with such a trope is similar to that of Chinese-Australian author Benjamin Law (2009), who outlines three possible strategies for handling stereotypes: introducing unfamiliar characters, creating characters that directly invert the stereotype, or deliberately representing the stereotype to expose the "surface values" (260) it conveys. Like Law, Yong adopts the third approach, contextualising the model minority stereotypes within the Malaysian-Australian community and its *gwai* ideal, as a mainly culturally shaped –not inherent– trait, and interrogating it from this insider's perspective.

Because Sam applies the ethic of hard work to creative labour, she has a difficult time reconciling ideals of *gwai* and model minority with an industry in which meritocracy falters; in which, as Sam ponders, "[w]orking hard does not always equate to success" (65). This tension forces Sam to negotiate competing priorities, pursuing a career aligned with her passions while ensuring her employability to avoid disappointing and burdening her family. Her internal struggle surfaces repeatedly, such as during a conversation with her parents after they learn that she is considering rejecting her scholarship. Sam contrasts "the part of [herself] who is Australian, who has grown up with gwei lo values all around [her]" and who is unwilling to settle

for a secure but passion-less job (245), with the pressure to be "employable," a value she associates with filial duty since "what Asian family wants a kid that leeches off them?," a belief that brings her shame and "poisons every thought, seeps into [her] determination" (246). The dialogue with her parents, together with her internal struggle, articulates the conflicting intersection of pluricultural values and personal desire.

Yet the perceived incompatibility between creative ambition and normative success proves largely internal. While the notion of "model minority" is used, the novel resists framing Sam's behaviour as the product of "tiger parenting" –her parents are supportive of her choices– ascribing it instead to a sense of duty towards her community and her parents' migrant experience. In that same conversation with her parents, they reassure Sam that they would never see her as "a disappointment" (248) regardless of her choices, revealing that her anxiety stems from her own sense of identity rather than external pressure. This is illustrated by her discomfort at the possibility of being perceived as "gwei lo" (247), an identitary categorization she associates with the privileging of individual happiness over parental one. Sam's central identity struggle is repeatedly cast in contrast to her little sister Eva –just as her sexuality is juxtaposed with Aneeshka's –who prioritizes her free time, hobbies and having fun with friends. Eva herself feels like she is "just like a gwei lo," a "fake-Asian with white friends" (106), for prioritizing her social life instead of achieving academic success, while Sam considers herself to be "[m]ore properly Asian instead of Australian," which makes her "feel good about [her]self" (248).

This is perhaps where the novel arguably lacks nuance by taking a dichotomic approach in its binary articulation of Asian and Australian identities, presenting them as opposing poles. Sam is torn by two impulses, each defined in contrast to the other: one marked as "Asian" and the other as "Australian," the latter understood as an Anglo, white, middle-class norm and often used synonymously with "Western." In addition to the fragments quoted above, in which diligence and filiality are coded as inherently "Asian" while freedom and individualism are associated with "Australianness," there are several other passages that illustrate this dichotomic articulation. One of the most telling examples occurs in chapter 14 when Sam listens to her sister express frustration about not feeling "Asian enough" and calling herself the "Australian sheep of the family" (181) because she wishes to engage in activities with her white Anglo-Celtic friends, activities her parents disapprove of. The term "Australian" is used to refer solely to Eva's white friends and excludes hyphenated identities such as Sam's Bengal-Australian friend Aneeshka and Sam's entire family. Sam reinforces this dichotomy when she describes her household as "a normal Asian family" in contrast to a "normal Australian family" (181). While aiming to express the challenges faced by minority groups, this passage inadvertently reaffirms the notion of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia where other ethnicities remain outsiders (Ang 2001; Hage 1998; Mishra 2005; Wang 2000). Or, perhaps, put differently, the novel exposes the endurance of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia in spite of its multicultural discourse (see Schwegler-Castañer 2025).

Indeed, at the same time, as previously noted, the novel critically reveals the affective labour required of diasporic subjects to reconcile communal duty with

individual aspiration. This tension is captured in the closing metaphor of chapter 14, where Sam and Eva hug each other, "one foot in each culture, both ... trying hopelessly to bridge what seems like an impossible gap between worlds" (183). This image gains further significance when read alongside the novel's ending. The challenge of balancing responsibilities with aspirations does not conclude with the outright fulfilment of Sam's dream, but with a compromise: Sam enrols in university without the scholarship –opting to study game design instead of programming– and takes a job at an escape-room venue, describing these choices as "a compromise [she] can live with" (364). Such a resolution emphasises the novel's thematic concern of negotiation rather than triumph, a theme with which many reviewers reported identifying and that Kamblé describes as central to the romance heroine's journey and to the genre's enduring popularity (2023, 16). Romance heroines, she argues, "enact a dialectic in which they accept some aspects of external definitions of their identity and contest others" in a way that speaks to readers since the continually reconfigured dialectic "represents the dichotomies women continue to face in the twenty-first century under late capitalism: native versus outsider, ... and so forth" (2023, 16).

Illustrating this dialectal appeal, online reviews suggest that Sam's negotiation of Asianness within a predominantly western context deeply resonates:

> As an Asian girl who was born and raised out of Asia, I felt seen and understood. (G&SR-5 2023)

> The culturally accurate references to Asian heritage and what it means to be Asian in a prominently white community: BRAVO! (GR-48 2023; capital letters in original)

> As a Malaysian-Australian myself, there were many things in the novel that felt like I could resonate with. ... I love the way this author combined Malaysian and Australian cultures together as well as weaving the Malaysian viewpoints which made this novel SOOO RELATABLE! (G&SR-19 2025; capital letters in original)

> [T]his book made me feel seen as a Malaysian-Australian buried under the mounting Asian pressures to perform. ... I felt seen in a way I don't even know if other non-Malaysian Asians would feel, and the only other time I ever felt seen this way was with Crazy Rich Asians, which was still highly unrelatable. (GR-24 2023)

One reader even reflects on how the novel prompted them to consider the scarcity of stories that mirror their own coming-of-age experience: "This just reminds me of how many non-Australian high school/uni stories I've read, truly so heartwarming to read something that reflects what I've grown up in!!" (GR-9 2023). This appreciation towards minority representation is expressed even by some reviewers who are less enthusiastic about the novel:

> Asian-Australian representation AND women in gaming?? It should've been a hit with me, but I just couldn't get past the writing. (GR-26 2023; capital letters in original)

> Normally I would rate this storyline as a 3 star but the representation of the pressure on the eldest child, and young Asian Australians brings so much dimension to the story and makes it a 4. (GR-41 2023)

Moreover, despite the text's dichotomic articulation of Asian/Malaysian and Western/Australian identities, some readers interpret its cultural references otherwise. One reviewer expresses that it was entertaining to read "the references to australian [sic] culture and lifestyles as someone who lives here. that was cool considering [they] haven't read a book written about australian [sic] characters!" (GR-13 2023), thereby identifying the Asian-Australian characters as Australians. Similarly, other reviewers identified the novel as Australian, without the hyphenated Asian or Malaysian, through tags such as "aussie" (GR-17 2023), "australia" (GR-8 and GR-35 2023; G&S Reviewers 1 2023 and 15 2024), "aust-lit" (GR-6 2023), "loveozya" (GR-29 and GR-34 2023), "aussie-authors" (GR-53 2024) and "aus-authors" (GR-71 2024), as well as through descriptions in their reviews themselves: "[t]his was a really fun Australian young adult novel" (GR-8 2023) and "[t]his incredible Australian debut is a hilarious, heartwarming story of family" (G&SR-2 2023)

This reception aligns with Law's strategy –which, as aforementioned, Yong adopts– of not avoiding stereotypes and preconceptions with certain characters, but instead centring "them as protagonists" as a way to invite "audiences not to see the Asian characters as outsiders, but as people who would personally resonate" with them (Law 2009, 260). Indeed, some of the non-Asian reviewers express that they could relate to Sam's conflict and pressures: "A very relatable story about older sibling expectations, the balance of persuing [sic] passion over financial stability, and working so hard to only have everything crumble" (GR-55 2024). As Hsu-Ming Teo argues, "the problems of filiality" that affect Asian characters are also problems that more generally "characterize and enrich modern lives in a cut-throat neoliberal society marked by the striving for material success and the privatization of social problems" (2020, 24). In this context, the tension between employability and passion –and its management as a matter of individual responsibility– becomes a universally relatable dilemma within a neoliberal structure.

This leads to the final dimension of this analysis: how gender intensifies these tensions and how the romance subplot offers a counterpoint of hope. Sam explicitly expresses how video games are dismissed as silly, as merely a hobby (54), and how being a woman makes it even more difficult to be taken seriously: "So many stories of women being harassed and discriminated against" (26). Her worries are grounded in real-world misogyny within gaming culture, referencing GamerGate, a harassment campaign in 2014-2015 that targeted women in the industry, including feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and video-game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu. The novel further illustrates the prejudice of the industry through moments of casual misogyny, such as an episode where a patronizing compliment escalates into hostility after being rejected: a male developer at the Future Devs Showcase –which both Sam and Aneeshka attend to present their respective video games– reduces Sam and Aneeshka to "cute little faces" that he will remember (289). Aneeshka dismisses him, "[w]e've met too many mediocre white men in the industry and the faces all

start to blur together, you know?" (289), which sparks laughter in Sam, and together they are able to emotionally manage his parting insult and threat, when he calls them "lesbian bitches" who will "never work in this industry again" (289).

By invoking GamerGate and illustrating moments of misogyny, the novel situates Sam's personal anxieties within a broader systemic context, where such misogyny heightens the cultural and familial pressures she already faces. This intersection adds a political dimension to her pursuit of a creative career; her ambition is articulated as a form of resistance, explicitly positioning her success as both individual and collective. This is evident in her toast at the Future Devs Showcase, in which she describes her highest ambition, that of going

> from dodgy apartment bootstrapping to becoming a leading Australian studio that'll grow the industry and make it viable to have a rewarding career as a game dev in Australia. I spin the story one last time, both for them and for myself, weaving in everything I ever wanted for us. For other girls who love games, who are fighting to be seen as a legitimate part of the industry without having to beat the boys first, who just want to do their own thing and still live up to their family and their community's expectations. (316)

Yet this toast is given at a point when she grows discouraged and is on the verge of giving up after her game fails to attract the same attention as Aneeshka's. Despite being described as "well-crafted" (305), one scout deems it insufficiently "unique" (306) to stand out in a competitive market. This disappointment makes her eventual decision to abandon her dream of becoming a video-game developer slightly jarring, although the text hints at the possibility of revisiting this ambition in the future (356); nevertheless, this ending is arguably more realistic and more consistent with the novel's thematic concern with negotiation.

Against this backdrop, and in light of the resolution of Sam's dream, the romantic subplot acquires significance; it is through her relationship with Jay that Sam gains a sense of equilibrium and belonging, leading to a hopeful ending. Initially, Sam perceives Jay as part of the same male gatekeeping culture when they fight over the last ticket for the video-game workshop: "having to prove myself again is just too much even though I've been doing it my whole life. 'Oh, so now I have to prove I'm a 'real' fan because I'm a woman and women can't possibly be gamers, huh?'" (14). However, her attraction to Jay develops because he understands her in an "intersectional way": not only does he understand her struggles as a Malaysian-Australian –being himself the oldest brother– but he also takes her seriously as a video-game fan from very early on in the narrative. This positions him as a counterpoint to the industry's toxic masculinity, an image further reinforced by the fact that Jay makes "adorable" (17) crocheted phone charms (218).

Where Sam expects dismissal after losing to him in a video game, recalling the times she has heard that "*girls [can't] play real games*" (136; italics in original), Jay instead acknowledges the difficulty of the game and treats her as a worthy opponent. Their shared cultural knowledge deepens this connection. When Sam arrives at Jay's home with ingredients for *kat chai suen mui* (calamansi sour plum juice), he and his

younger brother immediately recognize what she intends to make. For Sam, this moment –"to find two people who know exactly what I have in mind" (198)– feels like belonging. She reflects on her dynamic of recognition with Jay as particularly pleasant:

> The fact that we can relate over these foods that most other people would have no clue about? Also delicious, in that comforting homemade food way. Because whether it's food or gaming, I don't need to code-switch the way I do to make my Malaysian-ness more palatable to others at school – or, more importantly, to make gaming more palatable to my parents. (113).

When a threshold is reached in which Sam confides in Jay about her struggle to reconcile passion and expectations, his response of sharing his own experience as the eldest son expected to "set the example" (264) reframes their struggles as shared rather than isolating. This moment deepens when Jay expresses admiration for her dedication to game development in a way that positions her as a role model, challenging the gendered hierarchy that often defines gaming spaces.

Crucially, Jay does not offer to fix Sam's problems, but to stand beside her: "If you encounter a boss fight in life that keeps beating you down, I don't want to defeat it for you. I just want to hand you a mana potion so you can get back into the fight" (351). The potion metaphor reframes support as empowerment rather than dependency, allowing Sam to reconcile intimacy with her resistance to patriarchal norms, and her struggle against the competitive individualism of capitalist success. In this sense, the romantic arc is an extension of the novel's central themes of negotiation. What begins as a competitive rivalry –Sam asserting that "two can play that game" (7) when they fight over the workshop ticket– evolves into a cooperative partnership that redefines the meaning of the novel's title: life as a game is "so much better when played by two" (356). With Jay, food and gaming become spaces where she can simply be herself: "Sam, foodie and gamer and overall nerd" (113), rather than exist as a cultural representative or a dutiful eldest daughter. This shift transforms the enemies-to-lovers trope into a commentary on recognition and respect across multiple axes of identity, while also challenging the norms of competition and isolation that regulate both gaming culture and neoliberal life.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that Yong's YA romance *Two Can Play That Game* reconfigures Australian YA romance by negotiating intersectional identities –ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, the novel represents a noteworthy shift in Australian romance through its centring of an Asian-Australian protagonist and its incorporation of non-normative sexualities into a genre historically defined by heteronormative and Anglo-centric ideals. Its articulation of national identity is perhaps limited as, unlike YA novels like Alice Pung's *Laurinda*, which interrogates the racial core of Australianness, Yong's text reproduces the Asian/Australian divide,

positioning Asian identity as oppositional to an imagined white mainstream, mirroring broader cultural understandings of Australianness that remain entrenched in binary ideologies. Nevertheless, the narrative's engagement with diasporic pressures, gendered dynamics in gaming culture, and ace-spectrum representation broadens the possibilities of Australian romance and the genre in general, thus participating in the continual "recalibration" of the genre as it responds to contemporary readers' evolving "ideas of romance and the erotic" (Kamblé 2023, 17). In so doing, *TCPTG* fulfils Amanda Allen's hopes that "the way in which gender will be explored in YA romance will continue to expand, as will intersectional focuses on 'race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age'" (2020, 185).

This reading aligns with reader reviews, which highlight that the novel's focus on an Asian-Australian demisexual protagonist meaningfully contributes to diversifying the romance genre, responding to a need for more inclusive representation. *TCPTG* expands the horizons of YA romance by shifting the focus away from sexual desire and privileging recognition across diverse dimensions of lived experience. Ultimately, Yong's work exemplifies how contemporary romance can function as a space for negotiating intersectional identities, and imagining that a happily-ever-after is possible beyond traditional scripts of intimacy and success, even if such negotiations remain imperfect, constrained by their reliance on individual solutions to structural inequalities.

Reviews sent to the author: 02/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 01/07/2026

WORKS CITED

Adair, Joshua G. 2020. "'A Battlefield All Their Own': Selling Women's Fictions as Fact at Plantation Museums." In *Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism*, eds. Joshua Adair, & Amy Levin. Routledge.

Ali, Kecia. 2021. "Author Studies and Popular Romance Fiction." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Allen, Amanda K. 2021. "Young Adult Romance." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Ang, Ien. 2001. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. Routledge.

Carter, Ellen. 2020. "Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World: How Ace-Spectrum Characters (and Authors) Create Space for Romantic Love." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 9: n.p. https://doi.org/10.70138/HAEQ8192.

Dong, Lan. 2018. "Consuming Vietnamese America One Bite at a Time: *Stealing Buddha's Dinner and Inside Out & Back Again.*" In *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction*, ed. Ymitri Mathison. UP of Mississippi.

García Fernández, Aurora & Paloma Fresno-Calleja. 2020. "Competence, Complicity and Complexity: Hsu-Ming Teo on the Pitfalls and Nuances of Reading and Researching Popular Romance." *RAUDEM. Revista de Estudios de Las Mujeres* 8: 261–80. https://doi.org/10.25115/raudem.v8i0.4297.

Goodreads. n.d. "Two Can Play That Game: Ratings & Reviews." Accessed 4 December 2025. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61841856-two-can-play-that-game.

Graham, Pamela. 2013. "Alice Pung's *Growing up Asian in Australia*: The Cultural Work of Anthologized Asian-Australian Narratives of Childhood." *Prose Studies* 35(1): 67–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2013.781412.

Hage, Ghassan. 1998. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society.* Pluto Press.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2023. *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation.* Indiana UP.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. 2021. *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge.

Kobus, Aldona. 2025. "In Defence of Popular Culture: Affect and Engagement in Jane Austen's." In *Affect in Fandom: Fan Creators and Productivity*, ed. Dominika Ciesielska, Nicolle Lamerichs, & Agata Zarzycka. Routledge.

Law, Benjamin. 2009. "The New Lows: Representing Asian-Australians on Television (Screenplay and exegesis)." PhD diss., Queensland U of Technology. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/29272/.

Lawn, Joy. 2023. "*Two Can Play That Game* by Leanne Yong: Review and Author Interview." *PaperbarkWords* (January 22). https://paperbarkwords.blog/2023/01/22/two-can-play-that-game-by-leanne-yong/.

McAlister, Jodi. 2014. "'That Complete Fusion of Spirit as Well as Body': Heroines, Heroes, Desire and Compulsory Demisexuality in the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance Novel." *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 3(3): 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.3.3.299_1.

McAlister, Jodi. 2022. "Love and Listening: The Erotics of Talk in the Popular Romance Novel." In *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks. Routledge.

McCann, Hannah & Catherine M. Roach. 2021. "Sex and Sexuality." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Mishra, Vijay. 2005. "What was Multiculturalism?" *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 2(2): 1-47. https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v2i2.99.

O'Mahony, Lauren. 2021. "Australian Romance Fiction." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, & Hsu-Ming Teo. Routledge.

Oh, David C. 2025. "Counter-Representations in an Australian Web Drama: Trans-Pacific Repertoire and Diasporic Contradictions in *No Ordinary Love*." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 18(1): 98-105. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae046.

Pande, Rukmini. 2024. "'Get out of Here You Anti': Historizing the Operation of Structural Racism in Media Fandom." *Feminist Media Histories* 10(1): 107-30. https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2024.10.1.107.

Pung, Alice. 2009. "The Original Introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia*." *Peril* (November 27). Accessed 10 March 2025. https://peril.com.au/back-editions /edition08/the-original-introduction-to-growing-up-asian-in-australia/.

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. 2019. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Schwegler-Castañer, Astrid. 2025. *Culinary Discourses in Asian-Australian Writing: Masticating Multiculturalism.* Brill.

Selinger, Eric Murphy. 2022. "Disaggregating Attraction: Asexuality and Genre critique in Alex Beecroft's *Blue Steel Chain*." In *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks. Routledge.

Storygraph n.d. "79 Reviews For: Two Can Play That Game. Leanne Yong." Accessed 4 December 2025. https://beta.thestorygraph.com/book_reviews/66f69d63-2327-45af-98cf-ee5f391bceb6.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2020. "Cultural Authenticity, the Family, and East Asian American Romance Novels." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 9: n.p. https://www.jprstudies.org/2020/03/cultural-authenticity-the-family-and-east-asian-american-romance-novels/.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2020. "Who am I Without My Trauma? Confessions and Confusions of a Part-Time Asian Australian." *Peril* (March 15). Accessed 12 Feb 2025. https://peril.com.au/back-editions/edition-41-aai7/who-am-i-without-my-trauma/.

Thompson, Ashley E., Madeleine R. Hill, & Julia M. Record. 2023. "Can a Kiss Conquer All? The Predictive Utility of Idealized First Kiss Beliefs on Reports of Romantic Love among U.S. Adults." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14: n.p. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1256423.

Vares, Tiina. 2021. "Asexuals Negotiate the 'Onslaught of the Heteronormative.'" *Sexualities* 25(5-6): 767-784. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460721993389.

Vialle, Wilma. 2013. "The 'Tiger Mother' Factor: Curriculum, Schooling and Mentoring of Asian Students in an Australian Context." In *Exceptionality in East Asia*, eds. Shane N. Phillipson, Heidrun Stoeger, & Albert Ziegler. Routledge.

Vickery, Ann. 2021. "Revising an Australian Mythos." In *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry*. Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, ed. Dan Disney & Matthew Hall. Springer International Pub.

Voon, Shi Jing & Emma Pearson. 2011. "Understanding Early Childhood Socialisation in Immigrant Families: Malaysian-Chinese Parents' Perceptions on the Importance of Ethnic Identity and Cultural Maintenance." *International Research in Early Childhood Education* 2(1): 30-44.

Walton, Jessica & Mandy Truong. 2023. "A Review of the Model Minority Myth: Understanding the Social, Educational and Health Impacts." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(3): 391-419. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2121170.

Wang, Dorothy. 2000. "The Making of an 'Australian' Self in Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting to be Made*." *Journal of Australian Studies* 24(65): 44-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050009387584.

Yong, Leanne. 2023. *Two Can Play That Game*. Allen & Unwin.

Yong, Leanne. n.d. "About me." Personal website. Accessed 14 December 2025. https://leanneyong.com/about-me/.

Zannettino, Lana. 2007. "Hyphened Identities: Representations of Race, Gender, and Diaspora in Contemporary Australian Teenage Literature." *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations: Annual Review* 7(3): 47-56. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9532/CGP/v07i03/58013.

RECONCILING LOVE AND HERITAGE THROUGH CULTURAL POLYAMORY IN JANE IGHARO'S *TIES THAT TETHER*[*]

Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar
University of the Balearic Islands

Abstract

This article examines how romance fiction engages with interracial tensions and intercultural negotiations in Jane Igharo's *Ties that Tether* (2020). Drawing on polyamory as a relational orientation that transcends rigid structures (Milona & Weindling 2024, 8) and rejects fixed expectations about love (Anapol 2010, 10), I propose the concept of cultural polyamory to analyse the diasporic identity of Azere, a Nigerian Canadian woman navigating familial expectations and her relationship with Rafael, a Spanish Canadian man. I argue that Azere's exclusive allegiance to her Nigerian identity prevents her from embracing hybridity, while her relationship with Rafael enables her to reconcile cultural affiliations. Ultimately, the novel presents cultural polyamory as a transformative model through which love becomes a space for intercultural negotiation, fostering both romantic fulfilment and self-acceptance.

Keywords: Cultural Polyamory, Nigerian Canadian Heritage, Intercultural Negotiations, Love, Reconciliation.

LA RECONCIALIZACIÓN DEL AMOR Y LA HERENCIA CULTURAL A TRAVÉS DEL POLIAMOR CULTURAL EN *TIES THAT TETHER* DE JANE IGHARO

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la novela romántica aborda las tensiones interraciales y las negociaciones interculturales en *Ties that Tether* (2020), de Jane Igharo. Partiendo del poliamor como una orientación relacional que trasciende las estructuras rígidas (Milona y Weindling 2024, 8) y rechaza expectativas fijas sobre el amor (Anapol 2010, 10), propongo el concepto de poliamor cultural para analizar la identidad diaspórica de Azere, una mujer nigeriano-canadiense que navega entre las expectativas familiares y su relación con Rafael, un hombre hispano-canadiense. Sostengo que la adhesión exclusiva de Azere a su identidad nigeriana le impide abrazar la hibridez, mientras que su relación con Rafael le permite reconciliar sus afiliaciones culturales. En última instancia, la novela presenta el poliamor cultural como un modelo transformador mediante el cual el amor se convierte en un espacio de negociación intercultural que favorece tanto la realización romántica como la autoaceptación.

Palabras clave: Poliamor cultural, herencia nigeriano canadiense, negociaciones interculturales, amor, reconciliación.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.07
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 137-154; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent news coverage has drawn attention to the increasing visibility of polyamory in Canada, a trend noted in 2024, when the Canadian national public broadcaster, CBC, published the article "Polyamorous Relationships are on the Rise in Canada. The Law is Still Catching Up!" (Stechyson 2024). In the very same year, the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* addressed the growth of polyamory in the country in an article entitled "How Polyamory Became the New Normal" (Counter 2024). Its author refers to a study carried out by North American researchers that reveals that one out of five participants have been involved in "consensual non-monogamy" practices such as polyamory, which "has become the subject of books, films, TV shows and even a reality show, *Couple to Throuple*" (2024).

In academia, polyamory has also been widely studied, and researchers have provided different definitions of the term. In her work *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners* (2010), Deborah Anapol refers to The Oxford Dictionary's definition of polyamory, which is introduced as "the fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, esp. in regard to matters of sexual fidelity" (2-3). Christian Klesse goes back to the roots of the term and argues that "with the Latin part of the word polyamory meaning 'love' and the Greek part meaning 'many', polyamory literally translates into 'many loves' or 'more than one love'" (2006, 568). Lorenzo Montali, Alessandra Frigerio, Federica Spina, and Edoardo Zulato study polyamory as a legitimate alternative to monogamy and recall its description "as a personal identity, a sexual orientation, a relationship structure, and a relational orientation" (Jordan et al. 2017 qtd Montali et al. 2023, 896). On their part, Michael Milona and Lauren Weindling describe polyamory not as "just an openness to multiple loving relationships [but] as a form of ethical non-monogamy" (2024, 1) arguing that "polyamory is about *love*, but love can take many forms" (4).

Taking these definitions as a point of departure, I propose a metaphorical notion of the term, the concept of "cultural polyamory," which I read as an individual's love or emotional attachment to multiple cultures. Considering the understanding of polyamory as an identity category and a way to structure our relationships and relate with others (Montali et al. 2023, 896), I argue that polyamory serves both as a useful practice for diasporic subjects to relate to their different cultural backgrounds and as a label to define themselves. In cultural terms, for diasporic people, describing themselves as polyamorous implies that they have –borrowing Klesse's words– "many loves," that is, they love more than one culture. Leaving aside the sexual dimension, I adapt the meaning of polyamory that Anapol uses and define cultural polyamory as the capacity to maintain close emotional relationships with two or more cultures,

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

leaving behind the idea of authenticity or faithfulness to a single culture. This metaphorical understanding of polyamory becomes particularly meaningful within multicultural contexts such as the Canadian one. Indeed, Canada is marked by its ethnic heterogeneity due to the diverse countries of origin and cultural background of its citizens, which explains the deployment of the term "mosaic" to refer to the country as a multicultural society (Government of Canada 2022). Multiculturalism was institutionalised with the ratification of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* in 1988, making Canada the first country worldwide to introduce a legislating policy and "recognizing multiculturalism as a defining characteristic of Canadian identity" (Government of Canada 2024). Such a heterogeneous background makes individuals more likely to be attached to multiple cultures at the same time, in line with Anapol's claim about polyamory that "these days, it's increasingly unusual to find anyone who has only had one 'significant other' throughout his or her life" (2010, IX). Anapol's reflection can be applied to my notion of cultural polyamory, for people, particularly diasporic subjects, and those living in multicultural contexts such as Canada, may also have more than one "significant other" culturally speaking, that is, they may embrace and love more than one culture simultaneously. Such a situation is reflected in the novel under analysis, *Ties that Tether* (2020), written by the Nigerian Canadian Jane Igharo, which has received little scholarly attention to date. This article contributes to addressing this gap by offering one of the first critical examinations of the novel through the lens of cultural polyamory. Igharo resorts to a romance novel to highlight the identity issues faced by diasporic subjects through a protagonist mirroring her own background.[1]

Ties that Tether follows Azere, a Nigerian woman living in Canada who, before her father's death, promised him that she would preserve her cultural heritage by marrying a Nigerian Edo man. Conditioned by this oath and by her pressuring mother, Azere dates the suitors that her mother appoints for her, willing to fulfil that promise and not to disappoint her mother. Azere's personal aspirations and familial expectations regarding love and culture become conflicted when she meets and starts dating Rafael Castellano, whose Spanish heritage brings forward conflicts underlining the complexities of cultural loyalty. As the novel unfolds, Azere's journey to juggle the love for her family, culture, and traditions with her feelings for Rafael becomes more challenging. However, she manages to successfully overcome such tensions thanks to the power of love, since it is her love for Rafael that motivates her to confront the uncertainties derived from her diasporic position. Building on this narrative outline, this article explores the potential of romance to engage with interracial tensions and intercultural negotiations in *Ties that Tether*. Such tensions

[1] Igharo's other works are also categorised as romances and feature Nigerian American or Nigerian Canadian protagonists negotiating their diasporic identities. This pattern suggests how she relies on the genre to deal with issues of heritage, belonging, and cultural expectations and, in turn, reveals how diasporic authors, among others, have used the romance genre to share their stories and reflect on the tensions derived from their hybrid condition (Teo 2021; Young 2021).

will be explored through the lens of polyamory, which has been described as a relational orientation that transcends rigid structures (Milona & Weindling 2024, 8) and allows individuals to "[let] love evolve without expectations or demands" (Anapol 2010, 10). My metaphorical understanding of polyamory allows me to examine how Azere's diasporic identity evolves from cultural monogamy to cultural polyamory, where love for multiple cultures can coexist without hierarchies.

Just as polyamorous relationships require negotiation, agreement, commitment, and emotional work (Klesse 2006, 572; Milona & Weindling 2024, 6-7), Azere's evolution involves an ongoing process of coming to terms with her binary heritage rather than privileging her Nigerian upbringing over her Canadian background, as it is expected by her family. In this context, Azere's involvement with Rafael is presented as the catalyst for these internal tensions to arise. For this, I first analyse how Azere initially conforms to a monogamous allegiance to her Nigerian identity, symbolized by the promise that she made to her late father. This parallels the experiences of polyamorous subjects, who face external constraints such as those imposed by their family and society (Milona & Weindling 2024, 11). Therefore, I argue that Azere's transition towards cultural polyamory is hindered, since her parents' expectations condition her choices. Yet, as Anapol suggests, polyamory entails surrendering to love rather than conforming to cultural conditioning (2010, X), which is what Azere demonstrates by challenging the familial barriers that she faces and allowing her relationship with Rafael to develop. Thus, in the second section, I discuss that her love for Rafael is what instigates Azere's transformation from cultural monogamy into cultural polyamory as she is open and willing to commit to her twofold cultural identity. Ultimately, this article intends to illustrate that *Ties that Tether* presents polyamory "as a revolutionary and systemic change" (Montali et al. 2023, 896), for the protagonist's embracement of cultural polyamory enables her to accept her diasporic identity without having to sacrifice either her personal choices or her cultural background. This model of cultural polyamory allows for a happily ever after both in romantic terms and at a personal level, since Azere not only consolidates her relationship with Rafael but also reconciles herself with her diasporic identity. In this sense, Azere's journey can be read in relation to the Canadian "mosaic" model of multiculturalism. While this model supports the coexistence of cultural diversity as a key trait of the nation, Azere's experience highlights the tensions that arise when such plurality is lived, as her sense of cultural belonging is constantly mediated by family obligations and expectations of loyalty and authenticity. Cultural polyamory, thus, not only aligns with the mosaic ideal, but also reframes it emphasising an affective, negotiated and non-hierarchical engagement with multiple cultures that goes beyond mere coexistence.

2. CULTURAL MONOGAMY AND FAMILIAL CONDITIONING

This section examines how Azere, determined by her father's expectations, initially conforms to cultural monogamy until she experiences the tensions that lead her to begin her journey into cultural polyamory. The novel opens with Azere's

declaration of intentions: "Culture is important. Preserving it, even more important. It's the reason I've always abided by one simple dating rule" (2020, 1). Such a rule –dating Nigerian Edo men only– symbolises her commitment to what I refer to as cultural monogamy, that is, the exclusive attachment to her Nigerian roots. The expectation that Azere marries not just a Nigerian man but, more specifically, an Edo man reveals a wider reality within the Nigerian context, where, as Smith claims, interethnic marriage is still relatively uncommon (2001, 149). The rule is thus not merely the result of a personal promise or familial choice, but of broader sociocultural norms. Azere's family has internalised such norms in relation to marriage, which in Nigerian culture is directly linked to "obligations to extended family and community, privileging fertility and the social roles of mother and father" (132). From this perspective, the expectations imposed on Azere can be understood as a form of cultural exclusivity that mirrors the logic of monogamy. Milona and Weindling argue that, in its literal sense, monogamy entails exclusivity between two lovers, mainly in romantic and sexual terms, and add that breaking it implies cheating (2024, 2). When understood in cultural terms, exclusivity translates to loyalty to a single cultural identity. In the context of the novel, Azere confesses to having broken the rule of exclusively dating Nigerians for the first time (1). After a failed date with what her mother would consider "husband material" (1-2), Azere casually meets Rafael Castellano, a Spanish Canadian man with whom she is sexually involved. She describes her one-night stand with Rafael as "sweet and forbidden [and as] everything [she] wanted and couldn't have" (8). Thus, her sexual encounter with a non-Nigerian man metaphorically constitutes an act of cultural rather than romantic infidelity, as she deviates from the exclusivity to her Nigerian heritage.

The first encounter with Rafael reproduces the prototypical "love at first sight" scene of romantic novels, for Azere already sees potential in him although she is aware that a one-night affair is all she can allow herself. Yet, she confesses to having "felt the rise of defiance" (8) and let herself go: "tonight I belong to no one but myself, driven by my desires and impulses despite any consequences that might follow" (10). Her perception of the night with Rafael as an act of rebellion reveals that, as is the case for some monogamous people, the cultural monogamy she aligns with is not "freely and consciously chosen [but] demanded as a condition for love or enforced by legal codes, religious strictures, financial considerations, or social pressure" (Anapol 2010, XIII). In Azere's case, the allegiance to cultural monogamy is imposed by her family's cultural and religious background, particularly by her mother, something Azere makes clear from the very beginning: "for one night only, I am not the obedient daughter of a conservative woman who is adamant on preserving her Nigerian heritage. Nor am I the daughter of a patriotic man who feared his family's departure to a foreign country more than the cancer that was killing him" (10). Such a statement recalls the strong stigma surrounding polyamorous relationships, which frequently arises in socio-cultural environments marked by traditional norms, and often manifests among conservative and religious people, particularly women, who tend to be more devout than men (Hutzler et al., 2015 qtd Grigoropoulos et al. 2023, 1267). Azere compares her mother to a Nollywood actress, Patience Ozokwor, who typically embodies "the harsh, nagging, mean and sometimes outright wicked

mother or mother-in-law" (112). She embodies the "mononormativity" that Anapol describes, which is the result of the cultural prejudice towards polyamory and the incapacity to recognise it as a feasible alternative to monogamy (2010, X). Anapol's reflection on such a perception of polyamory can be extended to my notion of cultural polyamory, since the mother's "discourse is framed as monogamy and infidelity" (X).

Such framing manifests in several ways, not only in reference to Azere's relationships, but also in remarks about her physical appearance and her personal goals. For instance, Azere's mother criticises her for not wearing clothes that clearly reveal the shape of her body and even accuses her daughter of having got rid of her Nigerian outfits: "What is the meaning of this nonsense? Your figure is not even showing at all. What kind of *wahala* is this? It looks like your breasts play hide and seek. ... In fact, why aren't you wearing Nigerian clothes? Or did you throw them away to make room in your closet for jeans and T-shirts? (29-30; italics in original). Just as Azere's mother interprets her daughter's attire as a betrayal of her Nigerian heritage, she also condemns her eating habits, claiming that Azere looked healthier when she lived under her roof and ate only Nigerian food. Her daughter's betrayal of Nigerian food has taken its toll, as it is implied by the following reprimand: "Now you are on your own, eating those *yeye* Canadian food every single day. Quinoa salad, avocado toast, smoothie bowl" ... If you were eating Nigerian food, you would be more robust and have enough flesh to cover your bones" (30; italics in original). The mother also criticises Azere for not pursuing and fulfilling what, according to her, are the goals expected of a truly Nigerian woman, and questions the fact that she is still single:

> I don't know what's wrong with you, I have introduced you to several eligible men, and yet, here you are. Maybe you are being influenced by these modern women-no husband, no children. All they want is their career. You want to be a feminist. ... If you want to be a feminist, fine. But please be a married feminist with at least three children. In our country, a women's honor is her husband and her children. A career means nothing. (39)

Amidst all these judgemental declarations, Azere remembers an episode in which her mother replaced a poster of Antonio Banderas with one of the Nigerian actor Kim Iyke. This memory reaffirms her mother's determination to maintain Azere and her sister "rooted in [their] culture" (37); an attitude which has persisted since they moved to Canada, as she has been "shoving [Azere's] culture down [her] throat, so [she doesn't] forget where she come[s] from" (37). Azere's mother, thus, clearly embodies the mentality of those who favour a mononormative lifestyle, for she also perceives polyamory "as indecent and corrupt, creating feelings of shame" (Montali et al. 2023, 894). Her posture is constantly reflected in the novel through reproaches such as: "I have allowed you and your sister to reap all the benefits of this country. It's time to honor your own country. Zere, it's time to honor your culture. Or have you forgotten the promise you made to your father?" (40). Such criticisms expose a clear hierarchy of cultural violations, which can be metaphorically understood as forms of "cheating." Apparently minor transgressions, such as clothing and food

choices, are considered reversible and ultimately acceptable, whereas romantic attachment is presented as a much more significant boundary not to be crossed. Azere's mother may reluctantly tolerate superficial forms of cultural "deviation" as long as her daughter eventually fulfils what is expected of her and marries within her community, since marrying someone from a different culture is perceived as a deeper form of betrayal. Azere's love for a non-Nigerian man and the consolidation of that relationship are conceived as her and her prospective descendants' loss of Nigerian culture. Romantic love, therefore, becomes the ultimate barrier to cultural loyalty, as it involves not just personal attachment but also the potential reconfiguration of lineage, belonging and cultural continuity.

On her part, Azere shares the "uncertainty and the feeling of being suspended" experienced by polyamorous subjects navigating mononormative environments (Montali et al. 2023, 894). The fact that she presents her identity as Canadian as "both empowering and demanding" (18) illustrates her initial reservations towards fully accepting cultural polyamory. As she affirms: "it requires me to give up portions of my Nigerian culture so I can fit into my Western setting. And I've been doing that for years –compromising, losing bits and pieces of my original identity in an attempt to reinvent myself" (18). In spite of adapting to the Canadian context, Azere does not entirely renounce her Nigerian heritage. This is reflected in her visit to a Nigerian restaurant, where she eats *eba* and *egusi soup* (94); in her choice of clothing, such as her favourite dress "made of *ankara,* an African wax fabric designed with vibrant colors and bold prints" (83), and in her engagement with Nigerian storytelling and Nollywood movies such as *Isoken*, whose plot mirrors her own life (103). She also embraces her Nigerian accent when she is with her family, and, as she confesses, the feeling of being suspended often associated with polyamory (Montali et al. 2023, 894), disappears.

> The accent, the one I tried hard to hide after my move to Canada, forces its way out [when] I'm at home with my family, when I don't feel the complete pressure of being wedged between two worlds, when I'm not a Nigerian Canadian. When I'm just Nigerian. Then I speak freely, mixing pidgin English with Edo or simply speaking fluent English but with a Nigerian intonation, altering the rhythm of each word. (29)

However, even in these moments of belonging, the promise to her father remains unbroken, for Azere repeatedly refers to the voice in her head reminding her "the one thing [she] can't compromise on is the ethnicity of [her] future husband" (18). Therefore, instead of adopting the philosophy of polyamory, "allowing love to dictate the form rather than attempting to force love into whatever mold the mind has decided is right" (Anapol 2010, IX-X), Azere claims that she feels "sentenced to live cautiously and love selectively" (41). In doing so, she initially conforms to cultural monogamy –symbolised by the social expectation to love and marry a Nigerian Edo man– which would tie her to her Nigerian roots. Yet, after meeting Rafael, becoming pregnant with his child, and later discovering that he works at the same company as she does, she realises that cultural monogamy can constrain personal desires, for she yearns for a relationship with Rafael that she cannot have. Azere affirms that "he

has brought sensible chaos into [her] life that has inspired [her] to reenvision [her] future" (138). Her statement suggests that Rafael and the feelings that she has for him become the catalyst for Azere's journey towards embracing cultural polyamory, which might help her reconcile her multiple cultural identities and her emotional allegiances.

Azere seems to be aware of the key to succeed in her journey towards polyamory as it is metaphorically conveyed by a work project. Azere works as a Creative Director at an advertising agency, and when developing a promotional campaign for an energy drink, she suggests using a Nigerian actress and a Western actress to highlight their commonalities despite their apparent differences; to illustrate how they depend on the same product to get the boost they need. To defend her idea, she argues that "this method will help the product transition well into its new environment while remaining true to its origin" (61). Azere's proposal can be read as a metaphor for her own cultural journey, suggesting that transitioning towards cultural polyamory does not entail losing or forgetting her Nigerian heritage. However, when it comes to her personal life, she struggles to put that understanding into practice, develop her cultural transition and recognise her state as a polyamorous subject, experiencing the tensions derived from her diasporic condition. Like many individuals in the realm of love and sex, Azere is "struggling to reconcile conflicting urges toward monogamy and polyamory," though in her case, these urges operate in a cultural rather than purely romantic context (Anapol 2010, XI). Azere, thus, faces the challenge of reconciling the expectations of her family –for Azere to conform to cultural monogamy– with her desire and predisposition to a model of cultural polyamory, which will allow her to pursue a relationship with the man she loves while preserving her Nigerian identity. Azere manifests such tensions when verbalising how overwhelmed she feels as she is expecting a baby with Rafael, the man she likes, but her family expects her to marry Elijah, her first Nigerian boyfriend, who seems to be the ideal suitor:

> the haze that impaired my judgment clears, and everything hits me at once—my pregnancy, which Rafael is clueless about; my date with Elijah; my overbearing mother. The pressure, the expectations, the secret I'm keeping, the promise I've broken. I'm suddenly aware of everything, and it's all too much. (121)

The "haze" that Azere refers to suggests that she got swept up in passion, and the fact that she presents the tensions that she is exposed to as being "too much" reflects that she is not ready to handle them without feeling guilty. Her statement, in turn, echoes Milona and Weindling's reflection that "while polyamory allows for indulging in passion, up to a point, it favors readiness to actively manage it through emotional work (2024, 7-8). Their implication is that transitioning to polyamory is not just an election but requires a conscious effort to manage the social and affective obstacles that arise in practicing it, through communication and emotional work, and an ethic of care, understood as a relational mode based on love, empathy, compromise and responsiveness (Gilligan 2003). Cultural polyamory demands the same ethical and relational engagement, requiring Azere to communicate openly with both her

mother and Rafael, "cultivating caring relationships" (Held 2006, 15) that enable her to embrace her condition as a cultural polyamorist.

While Rafael empathises with Azere and supports her transformation toward cultural polyamory, Azere's mother maintains a punitive and judgmental attitude, which restrains her development. Rafael can relate to Azere's conflicting urges due to his Spanish roots, as he refers to "the pressure to succeed as *the other* in their new home coupled with the fear of disappointing their family back at home" (87; italics in original). Although her mother experienced the same pressure when she arrived in Canada, Azere declares that she has neither shared nor understood her predisposition to embrace a Nigerian Canadian identity but has rather blamed her for it:

> My mother didn't understand the struggle of trying to reconcile my heritage with my new environment at such a young age. She didn't understand I had to survive middle school and high school, not as a Nigerian but as a Canadian. To her, I compromised and lost parts of my identity. To myself, I made room in my life for two distinct words. I redefined myself, created a new identity. And my mother resents me for that. (179)

This statement suggests that since arriving in Canada, Azere has sought not to be perceived as "the other," but to accept her hybrid background, which is what embracing cultural polyamory would entail. Her mother, however, does not see what cultural polyamory represents in a positive light but as a threat to her daughter's Nigerian heritage. Her anxieties surface most clearly when she questions Azere's willingness to let her feelings for Rafael outweigh the promise to her father, fearing this would mean fully embracing a model of cultural polyamory: "Azere, you came to this country a Nigerian. Thirteen years later, you are barely that. What do you think will happen when you date or even marry a man who isn't Nigerian? Will you lose more of your culture? Will you still know who you are, where you come from?" (179). This reproach echoes what Anapol observes about polyamorous relationships when arguing that "multipartner relating prevents attachment" (2010, XIII), for Azere's mother transfers that same anxiety onto culture, assuming that embracing a multicultural identity would weaken her daughter's ties to her Nigerian heritage.

The mother figure, thus, embodies the prejudice and stigma surrounding cultural polyamory. Her attitude recalls the positioning of those who view "polyamorous relationships [as] less committed and less trusting" (Grigoropoulos et al. 2023, 1267), a stance she takes to the cultural terrain. She perceives her daughter's potential relationship with a non-Nigerian man as a threat to Azere's commitment to her Nigerian roots, a concern she explicitly expresses: "Don't you see that being with a man who isn't Nigerian threatens our culture–puts it at risk of being diluted?" (276). Her discourse reflects that she is the epitome of mononormativity, a term applied to "the institutionalized arrangements and cultural narratives that situate the monogamous dyad as the only legitimate, natural, or desirable relationship form" (Pieper and Bauer 2005 in Schippers 2016, 17). In her work, Schippers (2016) adds that mononormativity favours those in monogamous relations and penalises those in non-monogamous ones. Similarly, Azere's mother conceives her daughter's exclusive

attachment to her Nigerian heritage as the only valid cultural one and blames her for considering a complete transformation to cultural polyamory, symbolised by the pursuit and consolidation of a relationship with Rafael. Such an idea is reflected in the novel when Azere refers to her mother's reproof: "The disdain in her dark eyes is so vile, she almost doesn't look like my mother"; and later recalls her mother's own reprimand: "You imagine a future with him. Okey, Fine. But ask yourself: How much more of yourself, of your culture will you lose to accommodate him in your life?'" (180). At this point, she is dissatisfied with and ashamed of her daughter because she is unmarried and pregnant with Rafael's child. Yet, she is willing to forgive her as long as she chooses Elijah, the Nigerian suitor that she appointed for her, over Rafael, as she conveys when threatening Azere's status as her daughter: "If you don't do as I have asked, I am no longer your mother. And you are not my daughter .... If you are with that man, then I cannot have anything to do with you. I cannot be your mother, Azere. I won't" (181). Despite the weight of her mother's words, Azere chooses Rafael. That the mother disavows Azere reflects the extent to which she condemns cultural polyamory and, in turn, echoes Montali et al.'s reflection that favouring monogamy can create not only shame but also social isolation (2023, 894), as Azere's choice results in her estrangement from her family.

3. FROM FORBIDDEN LOVE TO CULTURAL POLYAMORY

The following section explores how Azere's evolving relationship with Rafael becomes the means through which she negotiates her cultural and emotional allegiances. I analyse Azere's struggle to come to terms with both her identity as a diasporic Nigerian Canadian woman and her love for Rafael. More specifically, I focus on her journey from cultural monogamy to cultural polyamory, which is motivated by what bell hooks conceptualises as the transformative and emancipatory force of love (1994, 2000). hooks does not understand love in romantic terms, but as an ethical posture against "the culture of domination" (1994, 244). Seen through this lens, Azere's trajectory can be read as an enactment of such a liberatory understanding of love, for she shares the experience of polyamorous subjects who, as Anapol argues, shift from internalising monogamous ideals to embracing non-monogamous ones (2010, 4). Her move from attempting to fulfil her father's promise by marrying a Nigerian man to accepting her love for Rafael symbolises her transition from fidelity to her Nigerian heritage towards an embracement of her diasporic Nigerian Canadian identity.

Azere's decision to pursue a relation with Rafael reflects her inclination towards cultural polyamory, because unlike her mother, she does not perceive it as a threat to her Nigerian heritage. Azere demonstrates her willingness to engage in the intercultural negotiations required to fully embrace cultural polyamory. In the same way as polyamorous subjects, whose "relationship journey involves finding a way to resolve what is commonly known as the power struggle" between those involved (Anapol 2010, 103), Azere must navigate the tensions derived from her diasporic position as a Nigerian woman living in Toronto who falls in love with a

Spanish Canadian. The intercultural negotiations Azere faces as a Nigerian Canadian become more complex once Rafael's Spanish background comes into play given that they expect a child who will embody the convergence of Nigerian, Spanish, and Canadian identities. Azere recognises that, as the product of a cross-cultural relationship situated within the Canadian multicultural mosaic, her future child will inevitably experience the cultural negotiations that have shaped her identity; said negotiations are conditioned by the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege that characterise intercultural interactions.

As Rambukkana observes in the context of non-monogamous relations, privilege often operates by "taking up space –as materially, practically, or conceptually taking up so much space that there is not enough left for others to inhabit" (2015, 29). The idea of "taking up too much space" is relevant in the novel, for Azere is afraid that Rafael's Spanish culture takes up too much space within their intercultural union, potentially overshadowing Azere's Nigerian identity and influencing the cultural formation of their future child. Azere's concern is made explicit when her mother-in-law's speech at the baby shower makes Azere feel "slightly nervous" as Rafael's mother plans to teach her grandchild "what it means to be a Spaniard. A true Spaniard," prompting Azere to wonder "[w]hat will that mean for [her] culture– what place will it have in [her] child's life? Will [her] child get a chance to visit Nigeria, or will he or she spend the summers in Spain as Rafael did?" (217). Such moments demonstrate how racialised and cultural hierarchies of privilege, which have historically been associated with whiteness and European ancestry, influence the identity negotiations of the following generation within Canada's multicultural context.

Through Azere's anxiety about the possible reproduction of cultural hierarchies within her own family, *Ties that Tether* makes tangible the notion of privilege that Rambukkana theorises. Rambukkana argues that the concept of privilege has evolved from early Marxian discussions of class privilege, through feminist critiques of male privilege, and critical race analyses of white or pale-skin privilege, to encompass other dimensions of power such as heterosexuality and cultural dominance (2015, 30). This framework is particularly relevant because Rafael embodies many of these forms of privilege: he is a white, upper-class, heterosexual man. Azere's reflections reveal how these intersecting dynamics of privilege operate within everyday negotiations of love, culture, and identity, for she feels like "a puzzle piece being forced where it doesn't belong" and confesses to Rafael: "I'm starting to wonder where my culture will stand in our child's life. Will it be secondary or maybe nonexistent while yours is front and center?" (230). Her fear intensifies when she asks Rafael: "How am I sure you won't impose your culture on our child and push mine to the sidelines? How am I sure you won't eventually do the same to me"? (231). Rafael reassures her by saying: "I'll learn and adopt some of your culture and you'll learn and adopt some of mine. For the sake of our child and our own relationship, we'll compromise and make it work" (231). Once again, he demonstrates his willingness to foster Azere's development towards cultural polyamory, for he is capable of "effectively negotiat[ing] win-win solutions to conflicts" (Anapol 2010, 101).

Anapol argues that a key trait of polyamorous relations is communication, claiming that those involved must be able to "express desires, needs, resentments,

appreciation, and hurt feelings" and find solutions to disagreements (101). In the context of cultural polyamory, such communication is key to negotiating cultural differences. Although Azere expresses her concerns to Rafael, her response reveals that she cannot envision a positive outcome, because her Nigerian heritage is positioned as unprivileged compared to Rafael's Spanish background, and because she remains influenced by her mother's warnings. Here, the limits of polyamory are tested when Azere must not only contemplate the idea of loving someone from a different culture but must consider the extent to which she herself and her child will have to engage in Rafael's cultural practices for their love to remain strong: "I've been compromising for thirteen years, rearranging things so I can exist in two different worlds. Now, he wants me to exist in a third-his. ... I'm terrified that adopting Rafael's culture will put me at a greater risk of losing mine. After all, my mother warned me of the possibility" (231). This conversation marks a turning point because Azere fears losing her Nigerian identity –by no longer eating Edo food or speaking her language– while raising her child, and, consequently, tells Rafael that breaking her father's promise has been a mistake, and decides to end her relationship with him (232). Igharo's dramatization of Azere and Rafael's intercultural and romantic discussions, thus, illustrates how cultural polyamory entails a continuous negotiation of power, belonging, and identity.

Azere's decision to break her relationship with Rafael implies that the transition to cultural polyamory that their union would represent is being withheld. Her reluctance to continue developing as a culturally polyamorous subject stems from the insecurity she feels in relation to Rafael's cultural background. She fears that his Spanish roots will prevail over her Nigerian heritage, even though Rafael has shown determination to prevent that from happening by embracing Azere's culture. Rafael's supportive attitude is not enough because she lacks the self-confidence needed to manage the power struggle that polyamorous relationships require. Azere becomes a reflection of Anapol's observation that "[a]ny intimate relationship is difficult without a sense of self-worth, which is not dependent on validation from someone else" (2010, 100). Her progression towards cultural polyamory is hindered both by the cultural power imbalance between Rafael's Spanish roots and her Nigerian background, as well as by her own lack of confidence.

This insecurity is what leads her to reconsider a relationship with Elijah instead, because, as she tells Rafael, "[he]'s the man I was always supposed to be with" (239). Azere claims that Elijah is "the pass that grants [her] full access to [her] family" (243), since once her mother knows she is not with Rafael anymore and is willing to marry Elijah, she forgives her, and the mother-daughter relationship is restored. Both Azere and her mother see Elijah as the guarantee of Azere's loyalty and exclusiveness to her Nigerian heritage. Her mother's response is particularly revealing, as she thanks God that "Azere finally came to her senses" (245). The fact that Azere renounces her love for Rafael and settles into a relation with a Nigerian man whom she does not love to preserve her heritage reveals that "polyamory tends to put people in the fire of uncertainty" (Anapol 2010, 100). Anapol's discussion of the instability that accompanies polyamorous relations can be read metaphorically in terms of cultural polyamory, insofar as maintaining bonds with multiple cultures

may produce a similar sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. Elijah, in this sense, represents the "security, predictability, and control" (100) traditionally associated with monogamy; indeed, Azere perceives him as the tie that will secure her attachment to her Nigerian roots.

Although Azere's mother applauds her decision, not everyone around her supports it. Both her sister Effe and her friend Christina question her choice, prompting her to reflect on the contradictions of trying to secure her identity through Elijah. Confronted by her sister's indignation, Azere argues that choosing Elijah is a way to please her father. Effe, however, refutes her reasoning, insisting that it is impossible to please someone who is dead. When Azere argues that marrying Elijah honours her father's memory, Effe convincingly replies: "and dishonour yourself" (246), later reminding her that she has "thoughts and desires separate from Mom's" (248). Her friend Christina also questions Azere's preference for Elijah, criticising her lack of independence: "you're a puppet and your mom your master [;] you believe being with someone outside your ethnicity will make you less of a Nigerian –a notion I believe was somehow planted into your brain by your mother" (255). Although both interventions are relevant to make Azere realise that she misses Rafael, Christina's influence is particularly relevant. She arranges a weekend getaway with Azere in a holidays house her family has in Muskoka, Ontario. To Azere's surprise, Chris's parents are there. Chris's plan is to help Azere confront her uncertainties about cultural polyamory by talking to her parents, for her mother is Nigerian and her father Italian. She wants to make her best friend realise that interracial couples can thrive without compromising their respective heritage, since they have lived happily together for twenty years without renouncing their roots.

Chris's parents serve as a model for cultural polyamory, having successfully embraced and maintained an intercultural marriage. To help her friend overcome her doubts, Chris recounts how her own mother faced a similar situation: she too loved a non-Nigerian man but, under family pressure and the threat of disownment, agreed to marry a Nigerian instead. This episode reflects that within Nigerian culture "considerable social pressure is exerted on people to marry, produce children, and fulfil their obligations to their extended families and communities" (Smith 2001, 147). Yet, as Chris reveals, her mother ultimately fled through the emergency exit on her wedding day (256). Chris's intention is to show Azere that her mother eventually broke free from external constraints and surrendered to love –an idea that echoes Anapol's view of love as the driving force of polyamorous relationships (2010, IX-X). Chris's mother chose the option that was, at that time, more inconvenient but, as she argues, "truth is, love is hardly ever convenient" (256). The reference to "convenience" here recalls Anapol's observations that, in contrast with polyamory, monogamy is often linked to security and control (2010, 100). Azere's perception of Elijah as the convenient choice therefore reflects her willingness to situate herself within cultural monogamy, prioritising predictability and security over the unpredictable demands of love associated with cultural polyamory.

The conversation with Chris's parents, however, makes Azere rethink her priorities. When she asks them how they make their relationship work, Chris's mother attributes it to "[l]ove, patience, respect, trust [and] acceptance", adding that:

"I accept his differences, and he accepts mine" (257). Such a statement illustrates that they both embody the key traits that Anapol relates to polyamory. One of its crucial aspects is appreciating diversity, "recognizing and supporting each person's unique qualities" (Anapol 2010, 101). This trait aligns with my understanding of cultural polyamory, as achieving it also requires acknowledging and valuing cultural difference. Another defining characteristic of polyamory is the ability to juggle several intimate relationships (100). In the context of cultural polyamory, this represents the capacity to embrace multiple cultures simultaneously, which Chris's parents have been successfully doing for years. They have learnt each other's culture and language without losing their own roots; as Chris's mother explains, "it just means our world expanded, became richer" (259).

Chris's mother's reflection, in turn, resonates with another relevant feature of polyamory: Anapol's emphasis on teamwork, that is, on "working for the good of the whole group" to generate positive outcomes for all the members involved in the relationship (2010, 102). Through mutual respect and cooperation, Chris's parents have built a shared space in which both heritages coexist harmoniously. Their collaboration has been based on "compassion, ... integrity, and goodwill" (XIII), which shows that the same principles of romantic polyamory also sustain and apply to cultural polyamory. Chris's parents prove that they have been collaborating to achieve what is best for both: to preserve their heritage while accepting each other's. In this way, they have created a shared space in which both cultures are appreciated, and their lives are enriched. Such an outcome has been possible thanks to their cooperation and the perception of each other's heritage with respect, which as Anapol notes, together with "compassion, [...] integrity, and goodwill" constitute the basis of polyamory (XIII). The same principles that make polyamory successful are not exclusive to romantic polyamory, but I argue that they also characterise cultural polyamory. In this sense, respect and integrity are crucial for polyamorous subjects to embrace multiple cultures in a balanced and enriching way.

The conversation with Chris's parents proves to be fruitful, as their relationship helps Azere overcome her fears and insecurities about cultural polyamory. After this encounter, she reconsiders Rafael as her one and only. Yet, the real turning point in Azere's journey towards cultural polyamory comes when she unexpectedly finds her mother and uncle in bed. She discovers that they have been in a relationship for a year and reprimands her mother for dishonouring her father with his own brother. Her mother defends herself by explaining that she had never been with any other man until her feelings for her brother-in-law developed, claiming that she could no longer live her life for her dead husband. This episode complicates the rigid framework of cultural expectations previously mentioned, especially those related to marriage duties, family responsibility and loyalty in Nigerian culture. As Smith argues, courtship tends to prioritise "individual choice, emotional intimacy, and romance" but, once married, the couple's relationship becomes "community property" (2001, 144). In this light, Azere's mother seems to have returned to this pre-marital stage, as she confesses her feelings for Azere's uncle, implying that, once released from the impositions of marriage, she can privilege her emotional desires. However, the fact that her new partner is her brother-in-law illustrates that she has

not completely broken with social expectations but reconfigured them instead, as she prioritises personal desire while remaining faithful to the principle of endogamy and marriage within one's ethnic group rooted in Nigerian culture.

Azere, in turn, reproaches her for having made her do precisely that –live for her father's memory, and the promise that she made to him– and presents this confrontation as a "life-altering moment of realization" (274). This marks a crucial point in the narrative because, for the first time, Azere challenges her mother without guilt, and presents this experience as "incredible, exhilarating, emancipating in every sense" (275). She blames her mother for abandoning her during her pregnancy and for forcing her to give up Rafael, finally admitting that she loves him. Azere's sense of emancipation symbolises her liberation from her mother's control and, metaphorically, from the cultural monogamy imposed upon her. Just as Anapol observes that nowadays "lifelong monogamy is more myth than actuality" (2010, XV), Azere recognises that for diasporic subjects, cultural monogamy is equally illusory. This realisation becomes explicit when she tells her mother:

> if this country is such a threat to our culture, you shouldn't have brought me here. But you did. You brought me to a country that has a culture of its own, a country that's also home to people from all around the world, and you've expected me to ignore these facts for years ... Do you have any idea of how crazy that is? (276)

By acknowledging that cultural monogamy is no longer an option, Azere completes her transition towards cultural polyamory.

Azere reconciles herself with cultural polyamory once she is no longer conditioned by familial expectations and can accept her love for Rafael, thus embodying what Anapol describes as "the freedom of surrendering to love and allowing love ... to determine the shape our intimate relationships take" (2010, 5). Although Anapol's reflection concerns polyamory in its literal sense, the same logic applies to my concept of cultural polyamory. By acknowledging her love for Rafael, she comes to realise what Anapol identifies as "the false connection many people make between monogamy and fidelity" and the association of monogamous structures with commitment (13). This reflection acquires a cultural dimension, since Azere no longer identifies faithfulness and commitment as exclusive loyalty to her Nigerian roots; she now understands that embracing cultural polyamory does not imply being unfaithful or less committed to her heritage. Building on Anapol's conception of fidelity as rooted in "honesty, respect, and loyalty" rather than sexual exclusiveness (13), Azere also realises that cultural fidelity is defined not by exclusiveness but by those same values in relation to both of her cultures. This insight becomes apparent when she tells her mother: "The daughter in front of you is proudly Nigerian and proudly Canadian. She isn't choosing one over the other. She's both. And it's okay" (296). This declaration marks Azere's full reconciliation with and embrace of cultural polyamory.

Such a reconciliation allows her to consolidate her relationship with Rafael, something which, following the conventions of romance novels, occurs after "the point of ritual death", an episode in which the heroine faces danger (Regis 2003,

15). Azere almost dies while giving birth as she explains that she was "suspended by a single string" (291), but then adds that she was rescued by "something . . . someone else at the end of this string –another heart tethered securely to [hers], calling [her] out of death by the sheer force of love" (292). The force of love could refer to her future daughter, to whom she is literally tied through the umbilical cord, or to Rafael, implying that her connection to him and love for him are what metaphorically sustain her.[2] After this episode comes "the declaration of love" (Regis 2003, 14), for Azere confesses her love for him for the first time, and he reciprocates. When reflecting on such a positive outcome for their love story, Azere claims that although fate has played its part, she and Rafael have also had a great deal to do about it (298). Azere's recognition of their role in the success of their relationship, and, in turn, in her transition to cultural polyamory, recalls Anapol's argument that "team spirit" is crucial in polyamorous relationships (2010, 102). Anapol argues that "when independence is combined with a team spirit, it sets the stage for a win–win style, which can create a powerful synergy with others" (102). This reasoning applies to the novel because, once Azere claims that "for the first time in ages, [she doesn't] hear [her] mother's voice" (277), she gains the autonomy necessary to negotiate with Rafael the way for a positive resolution of their love story. Azere and Rafael's compromise, in turn, reveals "the commitment to emotional work" that Milona and Windling link to polyamory (2024, 11). In the same way that "a healthy polyamorous relationship requires efforts to manage one's attention in order to nurture multiple loving relationships" (9), Azere and Rafael try to manage the tensions and challenges arising from their diverse cultural backgrounds. It is through empathy, communication, and emotional reflection that they secure a healthy and balanced relationship.

Cultural polyamory ultimately enables Azere to come to terms with what she calls her "culture-clash love story" (306). Borrowing from Anapol's assertion that "some find in polyamory an effective way to address personal issues that might make monogamy difficult or impossible" (2010, 94), Azere's journey can be read as one in which cultural polyamory becomes a vehicle for reconciling her diasporic identity. In Azere's case, the cultural monogamy embodied in her exclusive attachment to her Nigerian heritage had previously meant repressing her feelings for Rafael. However, as Milona and Weindling observe, polyamory "favors openness toward love's possibilities ... and rejects embracing hierarchies of lovers" (2024, 8). In the context of the novel, cultural polyamory also entails embracing one's own cultures equally. Rafael's genuine interest in Azere's Nigerian heritage, together with their ongoing communication and negotiation, is crucial for her reconciliation with her identity as a Nigerian Canadian. This reconciliation is symbolised by the reestablishment of her relationship with her mother and her betrothal to Rafael, both of which occur

[2] This moment resonates with the novel's title, and highlights the ambivalence nature of bonds, which suggest both constraint and attachment, for the ties that restrain Azere are also those that sustain her. Her emotional connection to Rafael is initially presented as a threat to Azere's loyalty to her culture, but it is eventually perceived as what holds her up.

at the very end of the novel. Azere's mother visits her in the hospital to meet her newborn granddaughter and to apologise to both her and Rafael for having stood in the way of their relationship.

After this moment of relief for Azere, the story concludes with Rafael's proposal, offering the prototypical 'betrothal' scene of romances (Regis 2003, 22) and fulfilling the genre's conventional ending. The novel thus offers a happy ending for the protagonist not only in romantic but also in personal terms. Azere's progression to cultural polyamory has allowed her to prove Anapol's argument that "love cannot be forced to flow or be prevented from flowing in any particular direction" (2010, 1) and to show that it "can be shared with more than one significant other" (XIII). In Azere's case, this understanding translates into her equal acceptance of both cultures. The reconciliation with her diasporic identity is ultimately symbolised by her and Rafael's daughter, Hope, whose name metaphorically suggests a future in which she will no longer have to question her hybrid identity. Raised in a context of cultural polyamory, Hope will learn from her parents to value both her cultural roots and to embrace her multiple identities non-hierarchically.

4. CONCLUSION

Ties that Tether reimagines the romance genre through the lens of cultural polyamory, a concept that embraces the possibility of loving and accepting multiple cultures equally. The openness and reconciliation promoted by, and inherent in, this model of cultural polyamory challenge the traditional binaries between conservative or traditional values and modernity, and between social or familial expectations and love or personal interests. Azere's journey demonstrates that embracing more than one culture does not entail betrayal or loss of heritage, but integration and enrichment, suggesting that polyamory –when read culturally– becomes a valid mechanism for diasporic subjects to embrace their hybrid identities. Ultimately, the novel reaffirms that love can manifest in different ways and serve as a transformative force for intercultural dialogue and self-acceptance. Hence, through her engagement with love, identity, and cultural negotiation, Igharo promotes ongoing conversations about how diasporic individuals navigate the tensions between personal desire and collective belonging. In this context, love is placed at the service of intercultural negotiation without compromising the prototypical happily-ever-after of the genre, as the novel offers a positive outcome for Azere both culturally and romantically.

Reviews sent to the author: 06/05/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 09/06/2026

WORKS CITED

Anapol, Deborah. 2010. *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners*. Rowman & Littlefield Pub.

Counter, Rosemary. 2024. "How Polyamory Became the New Normal." *Maclean's* (August 26). Accessed 3 November 2025. https://macleans.ca/society/how-polyamory-became-the-new-normal/.

Gilligan, Carol. 2003. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard UP.

Government of Canada. *About the Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. Accessed 3 November 2025. https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/about-multiculturalism-anti-racism/about-act.html.

Government of Canada. *Cultural Diversity in Canada: The Social Construction of Racial Difference*. Accessed 3 November 2025. https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/jsp-sjp/rp02_8-dr02_8/p2.html.

Grigoropoulos, Iraklis, Daoultzi, Konstantinos-Christos, & Panos Kordoutis. 2023. "Identifying Context-Related Socio-Cultural Predictors of Negative Attitudes Toward Polyamory." *Sexuality and Culture* 27: 1264-1287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10062-6.

Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global.* Oxford UP.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations.* Routledge.

hooks, bell. 2000. *All About Love: New Visions*. Harper Perennial.

Igharo, Jane. 2020. *Ties that Tether*. Jove Books.

Klesse, Christian. 2006. "Polyamory and its 'Others': Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy." *Sage Journals* 9(5): 565-583. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069986.

Milona, Michael & Lauren Weindling. 2024. "The Story of Romantic Love and Polyamory." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12764.

Montali, Lorenzo, Frigerio, Alessandra, Spina, Federica, & Edoardo Zulato. 2023. "The Discursive Construction of Polyamory: Legitimising an Alternative to Monogamy." *Sexuality & Culture* (27): 894-915. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10044-0.

Rambukkana, Nathan. 2015. *Fraught Intimacies: Non-Monogamy in the Public Sphere*. UBC P.

Regis, Pamela. 2003. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel.* U of Pennsylvania P.

Schippers, Mimi. 2016. *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*. NYU P.

smith, Daniel. 2001. "Romance, Parenthood, and Gender in Modern African Society." *Ethnology* 40(2): 129-151. https://doi.org/10.2307/3773927.

Stechyson, Natalie. 2024. "Polyamorous Relationships Are on the Rise in Canada. The Law Is still Catching Up." *CBC*, May 8. Accessed 3 November 2025. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/polyamorous-relationships-canada-law-1.7190273.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2021. "Love and Romance Novels." In *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Eric Selinger, Hsu-Ming Teo, & Jayashree Kamblé. Routledge.

Young, Erin. 2021. "Race, Ethnicity and Whiteness." In *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Eric Selinger, Hsu-Ming Teo, & Jayashree Kamblé. Routledge.

UNCOUPLING LOVE: RETHINKING ROMANTIC NORMS IN *PROFESSOR MARSTON AND THE WONDER WOMEN*[*]

Inés Hernández-Martínez
University of Oviedo

Abstract

This paper analyses the representation of consensual non-monogamies in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), a film that portrays a long-term polyamorous relationship without resorting to the sensationalism that has often characterised depictions of non-monogamous intimacy in fiction. The paper discusses three dimensions: the impact of public judgement on the characters' ability to live openly; the ways in which internalised stigma shapes their selfperception and relationship dynamics; and the performative strategies they adopt to navigate scrutiny, protect their bond, and craft a sustainable everyday life. I argue that the film offers a rare, grounded portrayal of polyamory that foregrounds relational labour, mutual care, and the complexities of sustaining non-monogamous intimacy. In so doing, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* challenges dominant fictional tropes by presenting non-monogamy as a valid and emotionally rich relational model, encouraging audiences to reconsider assumptions about what constitutes legitimate romantic relationships.

Keywords: Consensual Non-monogamies, Polyamory, Film, Internalised Stigma, Non-normative Relational Models, Border Families.

DESEMPAREJAR EL AMOR: REPENSAR LAS NORMAS ROMÁNTICAS EN *PROFESSOR MARSTON AND THE WONDER WOMEN*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación de las no monogamias éticas en *El Profesor Marston y la Mujer Maravilla* (2017), película que muestra una relación poliamorosa de larga duración sin recurrir al sensacionalismo que con frecuencia ha caracterizado las representaciones de la intimidad no monógama en la ficción. Abordo tres dimensiones: el impacto del juicio público en la capacidad de los personajes para vivir abiertamente; las formas en que el estigma interiorizado moldea su autopercepción y su relación; y las estrategias performativas que adoptan para gestionar el escrutinio, proteger su vínculo y construir una cotidianidad sostenible. Sostengo que la película ofrece una representación del poliamor, que pone en primer plano el trabajo relacional, el cuidado mutuo y las complejidades de una intimidad no monógama. Así, desafía los tropos dominantes al presentar la no monogamia como un modelo relacional válido y emocionalmente rico.

Palabras clave: No monogamias éticas, poliamor, película, estigma interiorizado, modelos relacionales no normativos, familias liminales.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.08
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 155-169; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

> Desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and cultivate them. (Berlant 2000, 5)

To talk about romantic love is to talk about intimacy and the hegemony of the couple. In a society shaped to make things easier for people sharing lives in two-adult clusters, there is little room for exploration outside of that norm. Such counter-hegemonic realities include the choice of staying single, aro-ace (aromantic and/or asexual) identities as opposed to compulsory allosexuality, or any expression of non-monogamy defined as the desire to establish more than one intimate relationship –sexual, romantic, and/or platonic. When discussing conveniences around the ideal of the couple, Roma De las Heras (2023 in C. Atance et al.) questions its conception as the *natural* way of cohabiting and relating to people, as it has been imposed as a societal construct rather than constituting an actual natural disposition. She also discusses how spheres, both public and private, are shaped around the ideal of the couple, including romantic weekend trips, holiday packages, and house layouts, among others (also in Jenkins 2025), always designed to fit into the preconception of coupling being the only available option. This hegemony of the couple is also flagrantly present in monogamy, understood "not only as a personal practice, but also as a social institution, as a political, ideological, and economic regime" (De las Heras 2018, 650; also discussed in Robinson 1997; and Vasallo 2013). Hegemonic on its own, monogamy is presented in Western cultures as natural (Willey 2016; Kean 2018), superior (Barker[1] & Langdridge 2010), universal (De las Heras 2018), and ultimately good (Kean 2018), and therefore the only valid script for affective relationships (De las Heras 2018).

Popular culture, as Rothschild points out, "shapes people's worldview, their emotional language, and their mindset" (2018, 40) and works as a mirror of society and is hence "another medium through which monogamy is shaped as the social default" (Rothschild 2018, 28). Monogamy is presented in popular culture not only as the "natural" and unquestionable relational style, but as the only possibility when it comes to intimacy (Casielles in C. Atance et al 2023). Such fallacy leads to the widespread belief that there is no other way of doing things, and so "living in a world that has been structured to fit only one kind of intimate relationship makes any other way of living intimacy come with a set of challenges" (C. Atance et al 2023, 59, my translation). It is precisely when fiction does not offer any further representation of relational diversity that "those who don't or can't find their way in that story –the

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

[1] Following the reference guidelines, this is the name given in the publication for this author. However, I would like to remark that they currently are known as Meg-John Barker.

queers, the single, the something else– can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves" (Berlant 2000, 6), which challenges the one-size-fits-all stance according to which "only one plot counts as "life" (6). Moreover, those rare existing representations of alternative relational styles in mainstream media are "usually focus[ed] on revealing their inevitable failure" (Rothschild 2018, 30). Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton similarly reflect on how "the one-size-fits-all "romance" narrative can lead [people] to try to force all [their] relationships into it, whether or not that story is a good fit for [them], the real, nonfictional person in front of [them], and the relationship [they] could build together" (2017, 157), which challenges the idea of the couple as being intrinsically and unmovably prioritised before all other relationships.

Based on a true story and released in 2017, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (also referred to as only *Professor Marston* below) offers an account of the life of William Moulton Marston (1893-1947), his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston (1893-1993), and the relationship they both shared with Olive Byrne (1904-1985). William was a well-known psychologist and university professor who posed the so-called DISC theory (dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance) and who, together with Elizabeth (also a psychologist herself), designed the first prototype of the polygraph. Within the course of their married life, they met Olive, a university student, who would later inspire William's DC comic heroine Wonder Woman. The film is initially set in 1928, in Harvard Radcliffe College, where William (played by Luke Evans) is a professor of psychology. He and his wife and co-researcher Elizabeth (Rebecca Hall) are looking for an assistant among his students to help them in the study of emotions and how they affect body reactions when participants tell lies. The most suitable candidate, and a passionate follower of their work, Olive (Bella Heathcote), joins them in their research after her first lesson with William. Soon after, the tension among them intensifies, up until the point of William acknowledging being in love with Olive. Olive, on the other hand, confesses it is Elizabeth who she is falling for. Following a brief period of confusion and rejection, the three of them come to terms with each other's feelings and start sharing a romantic and sexual relationship. Once Olive gets pregnant, the three try to find a way to get a life together. As part of that life, Elizabeth starts working as a secretary and William eventually creates comic heroine Wonder Woman, based on Elizabeth and Olive fused into one person, mixed with their recently discovered attraction to bondage. In the course of more than a decade together, each of the two women gives birth to two children and the seven of them live together as a happy family. It is only when one of their neighbours finds out about the true nature of their relationship that they put an end to it. At that same time, William's comics are being investigated by the Child Study Association of America, thought to be provocative and not suitable for its target audience. Only once William is in hospital due to what later will be diagnosed as cancer, Olive goes back to the married couple and they resume their life together, almost coinciding with the temporal banning of the Wonder Woman comics. As the final credits disclose, he would die in 1947, and the two women would live together until Olive's passing away in 1985.

Scepticism around polyamory and other consensual non-monogamies usually rests on two ideas. First, that they merely serve as an excuse for infidelity; and, second,

that they amount to nothing more than a throwaway body count with no intention of deeper connection whatsoever. These, together with the little representation of successful non-monogamous relationships that popular culture offers, inevitably leads to their invisibilization and stigmatisation. However, when representations of CNM end up in breakup, it is taken as an indication of its failure (Hardy and Easton 2017), whereas monogamous breakups never seem to imply the deficiency of monogamy as such. Through the analysis of polyamory in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), this article emphasises the importance of pieces of fiction that defy both the passive and the active erasure that consensual non-monogamies are subject to, "passively by scarce representations of CNM alternatives, and actively by negative portrayal of characters who breach the monogamous order, who are either punished or brought back into it" (Rothschild 2018, 38). Such pieces of fiction, then, oppose the common depiction of a "triad or 'V' disrupted by a tragedy that leads either to a seemingly inevitable return to a monogamous pairing or to the fated misery of a wounded soul who has learned a hard lesson (by attempting nonmonogamy)" (Willey 2015, 623). The article first discusses the public reception of a polyamorous relationship, and people's attitudes and preconceptions. The second part of the analysis explores internalised stigma surrounding non-monogamies and how the characters move (or not) towards self-acceptance. The last section of the article is devoted to performativity as a coping mechanism, looking at how both those inside of the relationship and those who are only observers interplay with ideas of disguise and fantasies of normativity.

2. "WHAT WE WANT CAN NEVER HAPPEN": PUBLIC SCRUTINY AND REJECTION

Public views on realities that differ from hegemony provide an excellent opportunity for measuring how difference is seen from the outside and to what extent it is rejected or accepted. In *Professor Marston,* such rejection is made clear from the very first scene, and even before the characters are introduced. In a flashforward, a group of people is shown gathering Wonder Woman comics just to throw them into a lit bonfire while repeatedly chanting they should "burn them!" (00:01:09-00:01:34). This first impression is by no means misleading, as it summarises all the attitudes and perceptions that most of the secondary characters display towards polyamory or any challenge to hegemony. As Sara Ahmed claims, in order to be accepted by a community, you first "must become acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable" (2009, n.p.), and this scene in the film clearly represents what society is not willing to accept.

Throughout the entire film, in a set of flashes back and forth in time, William is shown being investigated and questioned by the Head of the Child Study Association of America regarding the (in)decency portrayed in his comics, as "Wonder Woman has drawn criticism for being full of depictions of bondage, spanking, torture, homosexuality, and other sex perversions" (00:02:02-00:02:10) not suitable for children who, from the first editions of the collection, had been shown laughing

and having fun while reading such comics. In a quite straightforward metaphor, the unnamed interviewer impersonates not only that censorship she is imposing on behalf of the association she represents, but also what could be identified as normativity. By policing the content of the comics, which William has been making increasingly provocative in response to the Head of the Child Study Association of America first attempts of cancelling the series, she is also constraining the possibility of any lifestyle that does not adhere to what is socially considered as "natural" or "normal" (De las Heras 2018). The association, then, is only willing to offer the readers one possible narrative to which their lives should adjust. It is Elizabeth, right after the three of them have accepted their feelings one way or another, who first comes to the realisation that "what [they] want can never happen" not because of them considering it particularly wrong, but because "the world won't let it" (00:37:03-00:37:11), as the interviewer proves.

Such external constraint aligns with Lauren Berlant's idea that intimacy "reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic" (Berlant 2000, 7), where polyamory in this case can never be contained within the "unproblematic," and rules are tacitly dictated in order to keep any sort of deviations at bay. The number one rule of that set might unsurprisingly be that of staying "normal." While definitions of normalcy and what could or should be considered as such are always biased and hold a certain level of prejudice and usually also privilege, it is my contention that the film clearly depicts compulsory heterosexuality, the nuclear family and mononormativity as the only accepted set of choices for intimacy. While the term itself suggests that whatever happens within that intimacy should remain, indeed, intimate, public reactions to what happens behind closed doors construct a recurring narrative on several occasions in *Professor Marston*. In order to exemplify this, I consider the two moments in which the protagonists' lives suffer a sudden and drastic change: when they are first outed, and both William and Elizabeth lose their jobs and when they are discovered by a neighbour and almost forced to move if they do not end their relationship.

In the first of these two situations, their evident joy when they are together walking around campus, together with a couple of a-bit-too-close moments of physical contact, begins to raise suspicion. The snowballing effect ends first with Olive's engagement with her until-then fiancé Brant, and almost simultaneously with the Marstons' career as university staff members. Although such an involuntary unveiling of their intimacy might be inconvenient to say the least, it is the apparent outrage they provoke in others, who even consider them depraved, that transforms them into what Sara Ahmed calls "affect aliens," as "the object in which [they invest their] happiness is unworthy" (2010, 35). This first exposure of their private life not only leads to their firing, but it also profoundly hinders William's attempts at getting a new job, as the key and almost only important question he receives from his interviewer is "are you all still together?," and while William answers right away "I don't see how my personal life is anyone's business" (00:56:48-00:56:55), the fact that he does not get the new position makes it clear that his personal life carries a lot more weight than he believes or might be willing to admit.

The scene that takes place right after the three of them are caught having intimate intercourse in their own house proves even more revealing. It is 1940, and they have been living in the same house for around six years already when one of their neighbours walks in unannounced, following the noises she hears until she finds the three of them half-naked in a rather compromising situation: Olive kissing Elizabeth, who is at the same time tied up together with William. Next on screen, one of their kids is shown coming back home from school with a black eye and a bloody lip, and his bike with a flat tire. This evident backlash coming from the neighbour's kids beating up Donn is even excused by his bully's mother: "you're passing your life as normal, and it's not. You can live your life however you want, it's a free country. But when it comes to my kids, I'm sorry but I don't want them exposed to people like you" (01:24:28-01:24:40). This is an argument deeply rooted in the utter fear of the unknown or the different, and which allegedly justifies "the repetition of violence against the bodies of others in the name of protecting" (Ahmed 2014, 47) what is understood as normative. Such counter-normative behaviour, Carrie Jenkins argues, is read as threatening by others who adhere to hegemonic rules (2024). Once branded as "fucking freaks" and "perverts" (01:24:50-01:24:57), Elizabeth decides to put an end to their relationship, having broken the promise of not letting it "come back on [their] children" (00:57:59-00:58:00). Although it is a unilateral decision, both Olive and William comply with it, and Olive leaves the family house with her two (biological) children. Such outcome, however rational it might appear to be, reflects the extent to which external views on their intimacy condition them, and how their love life is subjected to scrutiny and judged upon with utter impunity. Interestingly, there is no intention to idealise polyamory at all, an idea that is even opposed by Elizabeth when she recognises "perhaps they are right to beat us ... because we're foolish enough to think that we're better than them" (01:27:10-01:27:19). By reflecting on this idea of moral superiority, she briefly tackles on what has been termed mono-poly wars –the confrontation between "polyphobia" and "polypride" (Ferrer 2018)– and accepts both relational styles are flawed and therefore valid, which is the overall tone of the film.

However, this is not the first, nor the only time in the film in which a third party constructs an image of a person they do not know. Although in a more analytic way, it is Elizabeth who studies Olive's behaviour from afar, even before any of them have officially met. In this scene, Olive is avoiding a man's eye contact and shown as rather conflicted with his closeness in campus. Meanwhile, the couple are talking about her being the most suitable candidate, and Elizabeth cannot avoid but noticing how she "averts her eyes. If she makes eye contact with that boy for too long, he will misunderstand and think she's interested. And then, when she invariably rejects his advances, he'll think she's a slut" (00:06:07-00:06:20). Yet, it is not only him who would read Olive that way, as Elizabeth herself aggressively and openly warns her: "if you fuck my husband, I'll kill you" (00:08:40-00:08:42), insisting that she is only "asking [her] the courtesy of please not fucking [her] husband" (00:09:04-00:09:07), in a bout of jealousy that I further discuss in the next section.

3. "OUR LOVE IS ILLEGAL": THE INTIMATE PATH TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE

It is not unusual to see characters being conflicted with their choices, even more so when such choices transgress convenient social norms. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* biographical drama is no exception to this unwritten rule, as it features the internal conflict of its three main characters when they face the possibility of building a relationship first, and a life together afterwards. Although they are very much influenced by their environment and America in the 1920s-1940s is not a period specially known for its welcoming of otherness, they do belong to a specific social sphere that allows them to see the world through the lens of change and possibility. On the one hand, Olive is the daughter of radical feminist Ethel Byrne and niece of birth control activist Margaret Sanger, while on the other hand the Marstons have actively supported the two of them in their fight for women's suffrage and are repeatedly shown bypassing Prohibition. I argue that their background is the perfect breeding ground for them to navigate the difficulties they face throughout their relationship. While both internal and external conflicts are depicted in the film, the generally optimistic tone in which it is set invites growth and a positive development towards acceptance. It is not, however, a straightforward path for them to follow, but rather a journey marked by bends and dark alleys.

Polyamory is based on the lack of sexual and/or romantic exclusivity and the rejection of belonging to someone (Barker & Langdridge 2010), and although the specifics that rule each relationship are unique and cannot be extrapolated to all of them, it is a *sine qua non* condition for a relationship to be considered polyamorous. This non-exclusivity is first hinted in the film during the already mentioned conversation between William and Elizabeth when they are both focused on Olive's behaviour. Once William has stated his desire to further understand her, Elizabeth invites him to satisfy his curiosity ensuring him she does "not experience sexual jealousy," and she goes on: "Who am I to fight nature? I'm your wife, not your jailor" (00:07:26-00:07:33). While such a first so-understanding and open reaction would suggest that she is, indeed, fine with him exploring whatever he wants to, Elizabeth soon displays a significant degree of jealousy when she faces Olive and threatens her. William's immediate confusion when he learns what has happened between the two women gets verbalised when he puts forward, "before, you said it was all right" (00:11:39-00:11:40). However natural, Elizabeth changing her mind becomes destabilising for a couple that has been shown to be close and solid until then. Elizabeth's internal conflict when facing her own jealousy, I argue, complies with the conception of romantic relationships as intrinsically exclusive and jealousy itself as an inescapable feeling rather than a set of reactions that –as it is made obvious as the film continues– can be worked through.

It is not until some time later, when the three of them have grown fonder of each other, that they begin to experience some level of intimate attachment and eventually confess their feelings –literally "confessing" in the first instance, as they do so while testing their lie detector. Their fully-consensual polyamorous relationship hence begins with this tripartite confession, thus aligning with Deborah Anapol's

definition of polyamory as simply "loving more than one person at a time when it comes to romantic or erotic love" (2010, 1), and grows as the film continues. Their relationship is first characterised by a too-obvious infatuation around campus and a highly sexual drive, but develops into a more romantic-driven one as the years go by. As their shared new relationship energy fades, their polyamorous relationship settles into a more stable and family-oriented one with the birth of the four children that they raise together. What initially functioned as a source of jealousy within the married couple, reaches a turning point when they move towards feelings of compersion, defined as "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another" (Ritchie & Barker 2006, 14). Thus, initial hard feelings of jealousy and envy turn into an until-then unknown possibility of enjoying through another person's joy as an act of selfless love. In Elizabeth's words, "maybe I'm in love with her too. Or maybe I just want her because you do" (00:35:49-00:35:57). The turn from utter compersion to their own experienced joy is portrayed on screen through a set of consecutive scenes showing Olive's rejection of her until-then fiancé, her pregnancy, and later their negotiations around moving together and starting their family.

When exploring this new relationship that they are discovering together, there are at least two social ideals they must confront: marriage and the building up of a family. Although marriage itself is not directly discussed as part of their agreements, nor is it something they seem to be conflicted with, Olive and Elizabeth do share a conversation around the idea of marriage and its meaning that is worth discussing, as it differs from what could be considered normative, at least in the 1920s. Curious about their relationship and how long they have been together, Olive asks Elizabeth when they met and when they got married. Almost daydreaming, Elizabeth explains that William had to ask her more than once before she considered accepting. Olive then asks, "what made you hesitate?," to which Elizabeth concedes, "I was afraid I would always be in his shadow." She insists, "why did you say yes?," "[because] he respects me and loves me" (00:27:50-00:28:13). Coincidentally or not, Elizabeth chooses to place respect before love, which is established as the core of a relationship in which love can fluctuate, come and go, but mutual respect is expected to stay intact, as it is constantly shown in the way both of them support each other in their research and, more prominently, in how William tries to support Elizabeth in her endless struggle to be recognised by Harvard and not only by its "sister school" Radcliffe (00:02:52).

Not only marriage gets reimagined, as from the moment Olive first gets pregnant they agree that "it's [Elizabeth's] child also" (00:55:20-00:55:22), which opens up the possibility for a non-nuclear family structure, or what Pallotta-Chiarolli calls "border families," referring –among others– to "family members who are in openly negotiated loving/intimate/sexual relationships with more than one person" (2010, 2). Their reconfiguration of the family is possibly the one point around which they are less conflicted: they do not struggle in showing their love to their kids, the three of them are actively involved in their upbringing, and even the kids are used to call both women their mother. Such work around the normalisation of this border family offers

a refreshing view on polyamory and how it can –and does– go beyond the merely intimate sphere and how it constitutes an alternative not only to the monogamous practice of coupling, but also the monogamous system as nuclear.

One of the other key aspects of polyamory that is openly discussed in the film, and related to the already mentioned idea of non-exclusivity, is the questioning of the idea that a single person is able to fulfil all of their partner's needs or desires, thus questioning the existence of a "better half." In *Professor Marston,* this is taken to a highly symbolic sphere through the design and construction of Wonder Woman as a fictional character who unites Olive and Elizabeth. The superheroine is so clearly influenced by the two women that her main weapon, the Lasso of Truth, forces her enemies to tell the truth when captured. Not only does this weapon hint at their research on the lie detector, but it also combines their scientific discoveries with their interest in bondage as part of their exploration of submission.

When first asked if being in love with two people at the same time could be even possible, William passionately tells his wife "[Olive] is beautiful, guileless, kind, pure of heart. And you are brilliant, ferocious, hilarious, and a grade-A bitch. Together you are the perfect woman" (00:36:06-00:36:32). By appreciating Olive's attributes without depreciating Elizabeth's, William embodies what is commonly known as "the abundance of love" (Hardy and Easton 1997; Nordgren 2012, among others), that maintains that expressing love for someone –romantically or otherwise– does not imply taking that amount of love from an already-loved one. Notwithstanding William's appreciation of both women's attributes, his use of passive and active language, respectively, can be interpreted as a veiled comparison or hierarchisation of the two of them in which Elizabeth is granted a higher, more active rank, as his wife and therefore longer relationship. William goes even further in his metaphor of the "perfect woman" when giving life to his comic heroine, who combines aspects from one of Olive's outfits, as well as an evident resemblance with her group of college friends, while adding Elizabeth's determination to "fight Nazis" (01:15:32). In his own words, "Wonder Woman is a love letter. She is a fantasy. She comes from a distant place where there is beauty, and justice, and respect. I write what I see about women I know, women who are every bit as just as strong, and capable as Wonder Woman. ... [She] stands for the truth" (01:41:20-01:41:57). Wonder Woman, in a way, is how William stays (publicly) loyal to his love for the two women representing them as a conjunction. At the same time, however, this "fantasy" suggests only a fictional woman could ever hold all the attributes that the superheroine is gifted with –both active and emotional ones– which can be taken as a depreciating stance.

However, contrary to William's will of celebration and openness, there are also undertones of fear and shame that intermittently linger over the three characters throughout the film, and that transcend the public sphere to infiltrate their intimacy. It is worth mentioning that their love is described by William himself as "illegal" (01:10:19), which is the same word used in the film for another two practices: alcohol and pornography. However, they are never shown conflicted by the idea of being caught in any of the other two spheres. Although Elizabeth argues that "what [they] do in the privacy of [their] home is [their] business" (01:10:20-01:10:23), it is her who in the end will give up on their love and their relationship in order to avoid

further backlash. While she argues she is only trying to protect their kids, William bitterly points out they are "inheriting [her] shame" (01:36:34-01:36:35). This reflection ultimately pushes her in her reconciliation with both Olive and William, but also with their "unconventional life" (00:40:29) and love.

4. "WHY THE ELABORATE CHARADE?": PERFORMATIVITY AS THE KEY FOR SURVIVAL

Both spheres –public and intimate– collide in the way in which the three characters are presented to the world. This portrayal has two differentiated levels: their own life, and Wonder Woman's life as a replica of the former. "What kind of a world do you think we're living in?," Elizabeth argues, and she goes on, "*We* cannot be in love. It's preposterous, it is a fantasy, and we have to live in reality. In this world and these lives love doesn't matter" (00:53:28-00:53:48). I argue that the superheroine functions in the film as a metaphor that, through William's vision and creation of this fantasy, articulates the difficulties they face and how the world around them conditions what they can show and what they are condemned to hide.

It is within the first ten running minutes when the epitome of performativity is brought to scene. Olive stops by the college theatre right after she has been attacked by Elizabeth's harshness warning her against any sexual advances she might attempt towards William. On stage, some students are shown rehearsing for a play, in which Diana "the fairest of all the virgins," "Diana the pure" (00:09:37-00:09:46) is the protagonist. Olive is visibly conflicted with ideas of beauty and purity and what they mean for her –pure but denied of that purity because of her beauty and the alleged threat it poses. However, that same space is revisited later, after the three of them have started reconciling their mutual feelings, and they first kiss in the empty theatre. The space that was before devoted to purity is transformed into a playful space of subversion that they reclaim in their first intimate encounter, not on stage, but in the backstage. However subtle, the difference made between what can be brought to stage –that is, purity and normativity– and what they are forced to keep behind the curtain is more than telling. Moreover, the scene is embellished by their use of theatre props, which serve as a disguise. By opting for the use of disguises, the characters metaphorically settle for an altered version of themselves as a way of gaining some distance from their true selves. At the same time, this emotional gap functions as a shield that protects them from the judgemental outside world.

Their only way of existing in the society in which their lives unfold is to keep their intimacy as a secret, so they have to "make up an explanation, a lie, and stick to it" (00:58:01-00:58:10), which they manage to do for over a decade. While William and Elizabeth do keep a certain degree of normative privilege as a married couple with two kids, Olive justifies that she is living with them and her own two kids under the pretext of being a widow, kindly taken in by the Marstons. However suitable for them to live together, this lie affects the portrayal they convey –only as close friends– and pushes their relationship to the background and the safe space of their home. This decision, I argue, complies with the usual queer forced "choice"

not to bring any discomfort to others that might not approve of the object of their happiness, as posed by Sara Ahmed (2009, 2010, 2014). Such happiness, in the case of *Professor Marston,* is relegated even when shared with their kids and kept only for their back garden, never even the front one, where the seven of them can finally stop pretending and are shown as a close, loving family.

To some extent, the performative journey that the three characters go through lies in their experience with bondage practices. This forbidden subculture in which they find themselves involved almost by chance offers another dimension to the idea of hiding and behaving according to the established normativity –sexual, in this case. Elizabeth is at first the most reticent to even try it out, but soon after she reluctantly accepts to tie Olive up her doubts disappear into thin air. In a moving speech, their instructor offers a powerful simile between bondage and the outside world that perfectly embodies their conflicts when displaying affection: "They ask me why the rope, the costume, the roleplay. I tell them we play roles all the time in everyday life, constantly. Out there we are bound by much stronger chains than the ones we use in here" (01:06:26-01:06:47). By surrendering to this controlled and supervised practice, they are also choosing which ties they want to live with, as opposed to those they are forced to accept in public.

Ultimately, probably the most evident sphere of performativity in the film is embodied in the mere existence of Wonder Woman, which, as already mentioned, is based on the two female protagonists. The film's narrative is structured in two different timelines: the chronologic story of the triad relationship on the one hand, and the interview for the investigation William is being subject to, on the other. The latter offers a comprehensive view of the ultimate act of performativity through Wonder Woman as a fictional character in which their lives are reflected one way or another. William's entire interrogation serves as his own account of why they have chosen the life they share, while simultaneously positioning his interviewer as the reason why they must hide all those choices within a comic series. Aside from the most relevant subject of the interview, which is supposed to be the threat to a "decent" role model that the comics pose for children, the Head of the Child Study Association of America is particularly insistent when it comes to Wonder Woman's double life. While she carries out her superheroine duties, she also works as a secretary for Steve Trevor, her love interest, under her human pseudonym, Diana Prince. When asked about this "elaborate charade" (01:00:29) William immediately explains that "she does it because she loves him, she does it so they can be together, she does it for love" (01:01:20-01:02:15). It is also for love that Elizabeth settles for a job as a secretary even if she "too good for this line of work" (00:56:59-00:57:00), only because it will bring money to their home. In the same scene, the interviewer frowns upon this secrecy and asks, "would you tell she was living a lie?," which he denies arguing, "Wonder Woman assumes an alter ego so she can go to work" (00:59:35-00:59:41), the same alter ego Elizabeth needs to embrace, leaving behind all of her career conquered milestones and her life as more than just a mother and wife.

As exemplified, Wonder Woman serves as a metaphor for how crucial it is for the characters to remain hidden in plain sight. Praised at the beginning for its originality and fresh perspective on heroes and heroines, the comic soon moves

towards rejection of the unknown and the subversive. The same way that Wonder Woman needs to hide her true self, the characters are forced to live part of their lives only in the fantasy realm of fiction. For both Wonder Woman and the triad, letting their secret be known would mean "everything would be lost" (01:02:25), just the way Olive, Elizabeth and William lose everything they love and care about the two times their relationship is revealed. William calls this "real" world they cannot step in "Man's World" (00:54:14) in his comics, always using a pseudonym –Charles Moulton– that also works for him as his secret identity.

5. CONCLUSION

Professor Marston and the Wonder Women offers a realistic view on polyamory that avoids both mockery and idealisation, thereby creating space for the normalisation of diverse relationship models. The film shows conflicts, negotiations, agreements and resolutions, but also periods of misunderstandings and arguments, which build up a set of coexistent realities only natural for human interaction. As I have argued, *Professor Marston* visibilises a true polyamorous relationship and all that it entails: from internalised phobia and rejection to the pressures of society on a personal and intimate issue; and its shows how the two of them intertwine in the portrayal of such relationship, or in the absence of its public representation. Political, geographical and historical contexts condition the extent to which non-hegemonic discourses and stories are accepted or otherwise oppressed, but privilege also plays an important role. As Hammers and Sheff (2011) point out, race, class and education are the three key elements that define privilege, and polyamory is not an exception: it is only because of these privileged spheres the three characters inhabit that they are allowed a certain level of freedom to explore their non-normative, non-conforming relationship. Would this be possible with a set of racialised, lowerclass, uneducated characters? Fiction is, I argue, in need of the exploration of such a conjecture to show possibilities for non-privileged audiences that struggle to see themselves reflected on such an oneiric setting, however oppressed or repudiated these three characters might be shown.

All things considered, I take *Professor Marston* as a great step towards the inclusion of non-monogamies as part of the possible narratives to be represented in fiction. While misconceptions about these relational styles make it harder for accurate and respectful cultural representations, sometimes the risk is not as harmful as the invisibilisation of identities that comes with the absolute lack of it. In Rudine Sims Bishop words, "when images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part" (1990, ix). Although Sims Bishop explicitly discusses children and literature, this is also true about all identities that find it hard to see themselves reflected in the cultural products that circulate for them to consume. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,* however far from performing this task flawlessly, opens the door

to conversations around the depiction of affective and relational possibilities which question monogamy as the only available option.

Reviews sent to the author: 05/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 10/07/2026

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. 2009. "Happiness and Queer Politics." *World Picture* 3 (Summer): n.p.

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth. Duke UP.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP.

Barker, Meg & Darren Langdridge. 2010. "Whatever Happened to Non-Monogamies? Critical Reflections on Recent Research and Theory." *Sexualities* 13(6): 748772.

Barker, Meg & Darren Langdridge eds. 2010. *Understanding NonMonogamies*. Routledge.

Berlant, Lauren, ed. 2000. *Intimacy*. The University of Chicago Press.

C. Atance, Belo, De las Heras, Roma, & Beatriz Herzog. 2023. *Anarquía Relacional. Una Novela Gráfica*. Continta Me Tienes.

De las Heras Gómez, Roma. 2018. "Thinking Relationship Anarchy from a Queer Feminist Approach." *Sociological Research Online* 24(4): 644660. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418811965.

Ferrer, Jorge N. 2018. "Mononormativity, Polypride, and the 'Mono–Poly Wars'." *Sexuality & Culture* 22: 817836.

Hammers, Corie & Elisabeth Sheff. 2011. "The Privilege of Perversities: Race, Class and Education among Polyamorists and Kinksters." *Psychology & Sexuality* 2(3): 198223.

Hardy, Janet W., & Dossie Easton. 2017. First published in 1997. *The Ethical Slut*. 3rd ed., Ten Speed P.

Jenkins, Carrie. 2024. "Is Monogamy Part of 'Who We Are'? Romantic Norms, Defensiveness, and Collective Identity: The Royal Institute of Philosophy Edinburgh Lecture, 2023." *Philosophy* 99(3): 321349.

Jenkins, Carrie. 2025. "Polyamory Is Not Cheating." In *Too Weird to Believe, Too Plausible to Deny,* ed. Clifford Sosis. 19-46. Routledge.

Kean, Jessica Joan. 2017. "Sex/Love Skirmishes: "Swinging", "Polyamory", and the Politics of Naming." *Feminist Media Studies* 18(3): 45874.

Nordgren, Andie. 2012. *The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy*. The Anarchist Library AntiCopyright.

Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria. 2010. *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools*. Rowman & Littlefield Pub.

Ritchie, Ani & Meg Barker. 2006. "There Aren't Words for What We Do or How We Feel so We Have to Make Them up: Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of Compulsory Monogamy." *Sexualities* 9(5): 584601.

Robinson, Angela, director. 2017. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*. Annapurna Pictures. Film, 1 hr., 48 min. https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0RF0M2Z2152DDWETE95HH3ACNW/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

Robinson, Victoria. 1997. "My Baby Just Cares for Me: Feminism, Heterosexuality and NonMonogamy." *Journal of Gender Studies* 6(2): 143157.

Rothschild, Leehee. 2018. "Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence." *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 14(1): 2856.

Sims Bishop, Rudine. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Collective Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books in the Classroom* 6(3): ixxi.

Vasallo, Brigitte. 2013. "Romper La Monogamia Como Apuesta Política." *Pikara Magazine* (March 22). Accessed 3 Feb 2025. http://www.pikaramagazine.com/2013/03/romper-la-monogamia-como-apuesta-politica/.

Willey, Angela. 2015. "Constituting Compulsory Monogamy: Normative Femininity at the Limits of Imagination." *Journal of Gender Studies* 24(6): 621633.

MISCELLANY

LONGEVITY AND TEMPORALITY IN THREE POSTCOLONIAL SPECULATIVE NARRATIVES

Maricel Oró Piqueras
Universitat de Lleida (Spain)

Sarah Falcus
Independent Scholar (UK)

Katsura Sako
Keio University (Japan)

Abstract

Despite almost thirty years between the years of their publication, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023) all deploy the trope of longevity to explore temporality in their speculative narratives. The authors use longevity not only to represent histories that are excluded from colonial historiography but also to question the linear temporality that has underpinned colonial and postcolonial projects, one that dichotomises self and other, the modern/ the premodern, and the young/ the old. As our analysis shows, the texts instead represent multiple and entangled temporalities that reject these binarisms; forms of polytemporality that shape the lived experience in a global world.

Keywords: Longevity, Temporality, Postcolonial Speculative Fiction, Science-Fiction.

LONGEVIDAD Y TEMPORALIDAD
EN TRES NARRATIVAS ESPECULATIVAS POSTCOLONIALES

Resumen

A pesar del hecho que han pasado casi treinta años entre la publicación de Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023), todos presentan el tema de la longevidad para explorar el concepto temporalidad en sus narrativas especulativas. Estos autores usan la longevidad no solo para representar historias que han sido excluidas de la historiografía colonial sino también para cuestionar la temporalidad lineal que se encuentra tanto en proyectos coloniales postcoloniales; una temporalidad lineal que dicotomiza el individuo con el otro, lo moderno y lo premoderno, lo joven y lo viejo. A partir de nuestro análisis de los textos pretendemos demostrar temporalidades múltiples y interrelacionadas que rechazan los binarismos, y que se pueden considerar formas de politemoralidad que moldean la experiencia de vida en un mundo global.

Palabras clave: longevidad, temporalidad, ficción especulativa postcolonial, ciencia-ficción.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.09
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 173-189; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

As genres deeply concerned with the future and, more broadly, time, speculative fictions offer fertile ground for a postcolonial critique of the hegemonic (European) model of history and progress. This does not mean that they simply bring to the surface alternative versions of history as a way of "writing back"; they can also open up space for imagining multiple, and often entangled and competing, temporalities, that are shaped by local and global cultures and forces. Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann state, in relation to the ability of speculative narratives to explore the temporal disorder that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic bring about: "By constructing open, fragmented, and pluralised storylines, oscillating between multiple times that can no longer be subsumed under a singular temporal frame, they give rise to thick, multi-layered temporalities, in which past, present, and future entertain mutually transformative and shifting relations" (2023, 8). In this article, we are particularly interested in analysing how postcolonial speculative fiction about longevity may exploit this potential to question a hegemonic understanding of time.

Longevity is a common trope in speculative fiction, ranging from techno-enabled body transference to forms of mythical immortality. In whatever form, it typically disrupts the human life course and brings into focus dominant assumptions about time and often invites us to reimagine history. To explore the potential of longevity in postcolonial critiques of time, history and progress, we consider three texts: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023). Bringing together the colonial history of India and a futuristic setting in the US, *The Calcutta Chromosome* unfolds from the discovery of a chromosome that is believed to transfer between humans, attaining longevity of its own. *Victory City* engages more firmly with the fantastic in its centuries-long history of Bisnaga, a kingdom in pre-colonial India, a history centred on the extremely long life of Pampa Kampana, the novel's protagonist and the founder of the kingdom. *Nostalgia* is a dystopian novel, set in a future where the world's inequalities include differential access to the technology that allows immortality through physical and psychological rejuvenation. In different ways, the three texts all deploy longevity to represent multiple, entangled temporalities, questioning the linear temporality of colonialism that dichotomises self and other, the modern and pre-modern, youth and age.

Though we might debate how to label our three texts in terms of genre, all three create the alternative worlds – with their flexibility of time and space – that we associate with science, speculative and fantasy fiction. As John Frow points out, texts "do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to 'a' genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation" (2006, 16-17). As scholarship from SF studies in particular make clear, defining genre is a torturous process (see overview in Langer 2011). John Rieder, in his application of genre theory to SF, notes that definition is at the heart of many debates in the field, and yet often, in recent years, comes down to the sense that SF is constructed in the very act of defining it (Rieder 2010, 191). Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint recognise that genre definition is itself "contingent and

ideological" and that "all histories of the genre inevitably privilege some texts and marginalise or exclude others" (2011, 5). Rather than focussing on the exigencies of definition, therefore, we embrace the fluidity of the genres and terms SF, speculative and fantasy fiction, seeing this as appropriate to an exploration of the postcolonial, since, as Jessica Langer notes, this fluidity of definition is shared with the field of postcolonialism itself (2011, 2-3).

Although speculative writing, and SF in particular, has been implicated in imperial desires, driven by narratives of domination, control and conflict based on difference (Rieder 2008), critics see great potential in what they term 'postcolonial SF' (see Smith 2012; Langer 2011). For Eric D. Smith, the very history of the genre brings SF into alignment with critical theory, particularly in its dialectical form. He argues that "Born in the imperialist collision of cultural identities and taking as its formal and thematic substance the spatial dislocations that inhere in the imperial situation, science fiction would seem the ideal instrument with which to engage critically the transition from the postcolonial condition to that of globalization" (2012, 4). Indeed, the seeming dominance of Europe and North America in speculative writing is now shifting, as speculative fiction from China, Africa, India and many other parts of the world gains prominence and readership, often building on longer speculative traditions (Ezeiyoke 2025; Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 2022; Li 2021; Song and Huters 2018; Isaacson 2017) and yet "radically reconfigur[ing] the conceptual machinery of SF and utopia to address the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization" (Smith 2012, 5). In approaches like these, speculative fiction is valued for the critical eye it casts upon personal experience as enmeshed within social and historical forces, and the ways in which it creates the possibility of both interrogating and reimagining modernity, coloniality and postcoloniality.

Stefan Helgresson suggests that "problems of historical time have long been a central concern of postcolonial scholarship" (2014, 545). Postcolonial scholars have considered how European colonialism dominated through its universalising view of modernity underpinned by the conception of history as linear evolution and progress. In other words, they have interrogated how Europe has imposed "a particular way of doing history" (Gunning 2013, 15), repressing some histories and representing certain nations and subjects as not having reached colonialism's version of modernity. As exemplified by the project of Subaltern studies, the question of whose history is or can be told has therefore been central in postcolonial historiography.

Nonetheless, Helgresson identifies the limitations of postcolonial historiography that continues to operate within the temporal paradigm of colonial modernity. He suggests that postcolonial scholars have challenged this temporal hegemony by emphasising multiple temporalities, implicitly and explicitly linking them to specific cultural locations. He critically summarises two approaches to this. Linear developmentalism, represented by Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), criticises the universalization of the European model of modernity as an ideological construct and emphasises the importance of recognising different temporalities specific to local cultures. There is a contradiction in this approach, as time is understood as construct on one hand and as historical reality on the other. According to Helgresson, this approach reproduces the binary between the modernised west

and the pre-modern non-west and fails to account for the entanglements of global and local realities since the expansion of capitalism. A similar flaw can be found in the other approach, cultural relativism, that is historically rooted in anthropology, the study of non-western cultures by the western subject. Helgresson explains that although anthropology embraces non-western cultures, it tends to insist upon their separation from western self and modernity and end up marking other cultures by their lateness in the evolutionary historical process. Cultural relativism therefore does not change, and even risks reproducing, the hegemonic relationship between multiple temporalities.

As a solution to these aporias, Helgresson proposes a new conceptualisation of temporal difference that recognises the entanglements of multiple temporalities in the same place and at the same time. He states:

> Time, then, needs to be conceived of as *radically* multiple in ways that far exceed the evolutionist, colonial, and culturalist paradigms. Radical polytemporality would go further than Braudel's *durées* and acknowledge all the different modes of time --- domestic, national, personal, political, spiritual, geological, technological, agricultural, and so on – that continuously give shape and meaning to human life, and that are impossible to reduce wholesale to concepts such as 'culture' or 'capitalism' (2014, 557).

The polytemporality described here evokes a fluid and entangled ecology of multiple temporalities –both human and more-than-human–, in which lived experiences are embedded. Helgresson finds a literary expression of this temporality in the Brazilian author Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), a historical narrative that brings together geological, anthropological and historical times in its story of the late nineteenth-century War of Canudos, a civil rebellion against the central government.

Like Helgresson, others have recognised the importance of literary narrative in the exploration of alternative temporalities. Jeong Eun Annabel We's discussion of the postcolonial and speculative writing (understood in her work as an umbrella term that includes science fiction, fantasy and horror) makes the case for the important role of the speculative in decolonial thought (2024). In particular, We notes, drawing on the work of Kara Keeling, that the decolonial involves "an open acceptance of messy and unlinear temporality" that interrogates "the teleological alignment of the precolonial past, followed by the post/modern present and an enclosed future that lives in the narrow legacies of modernity-coloniality" (We 2024, 462). For We, speculative fiction and decolonial thought are both focussed on the "relation to futurity" and this involves not only the negotiation of imagined futures, but the interrogation and reimagining of the multiple pasts and presents that lead to those futures. As we go on to suggest through our analysis of three novels, extreme longevity, a common trope in SF, highlights the temporal possibilities of speculative genres.

Undoubtedly connected to the history of mythical and cultural narratives of extended human lifespans - from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Cumean Sibyl - a multiplicity of forms of longevity have long permeated science, speculative and

fantastic fiction (Yoke and Hassler 1985; Clark 1995; Slusser, Westfahl and Rabkin 1996; Lebow 2012; Mangum 2002; Brand 2016; Botelho 2019; Falcus and Oro-Piqueras 2022). If not quite the case in the broader fantastic tradition, then certainly in postwar Anglo-American speculative fiction and SF, extended lifespans and forms of rejuvenation tend to come with dystopian consequences, on an individual and social, often global, level (Lebow 2012). Class and generational conflict, scarcity of resources and violence characterise these societies. Identifying conflict as central to the longevity narrative, Frederic Jameson argues that "the longevity plot" is about history and class polarisation in late capitalism (2005, 335). On an individual level, loneliness and boredom, sometimes extended physical and existential suffering, characterise the experience of a very long life. Longevity narratives also tend to reflect the culturally widespread fear of ageing – and ultimately dying, something that sociologists such as Norbert Elias (1982) have identified in many societies. With advancements in science and technology, and, in many countries, rapid increases in lifespan over recent decades, extended youth seems more and more plausible; yet, longevity narratives often represent this as a form of monstrous anachronism, drawing on ageist discourses to explore the complexities of embodied ageing at individual and social levels. Frequently in these texts, a fragmentation of the self results from a lack of meaning associated with a very long or unfinished life span. As Oro-Piqueras and Falcus state, "as genres that push the limits of the human and our relationships with others (understood very widely), they offer ways of thinking about and representing both the philosophical and experiential aspects of ageing and generation" (2022, 1). The novels we consider here do represent the negative ramifications of extreme longevity, on collective and individual levels, in particular through the dystopian future imagined in *Nostalgia* and the individual condition of Pampa in *Victory City*. Nevertheless, they also exploit longevity as a lens through which to de-naturalise our conception of time and open up space for exploring plural temporalities.

In these three novels, longevity brings about temporal disorder and threatens the continuity of a unified self, identity, memory and history. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is most explicit, among the three, in "writing back" to colonial narratives but it also refuses to produce a coherent alternative history. In a manner typical of the postmodern fiction of the time of its publication, the novel highlights the palimpsestic and polytemporal nature of history by introducing the element of detection to intensify and frustrate the historiographical and hermeneutic projects within the text, and of the reader. *Victory City* is in many ways a form of historical fiction. In typical Rushdie style, the novel offers a speculative alternative history that exploits temporal fluidity, notably in the figure of Pampa Kampana, who both embodies and exceeds the formation and the fall of the nation state. Part of a slew of recent novels that explore longevity as class and generational conflict, in the Jameson sense, *Nostalgia* shares with *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *Victory City* a postcolonial commitment to interrogating privileged histories through a narrative that complicates the spatial and temporal boundaries of the colonial and postcolonial. Considering rejuvenation as one type of longevity, Teresa Mangum states that "while all narratives are profoundly preoccupied by time ... rejuvenation promises and fantasies ... often ... turn outward and become embroiled in larger concerns about time" (2002, 80).

And we see that in these texts. On one level, and to differing extents, these novels are engaged in forms of "writing back", presenting alternative, reimagined histories. At the same time, they offer the kind of "messy and unlinear temporalit[ies]" (We, 462) that disrupt the linear logic of colonial modernity and its inherent binarism of self and other.

2. *THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME*

The Calcutta Chromosome is a speculative (detective) novel that plays with temporal and spatial narrative as Ghosh moves back and forth from the colonial to the postcolonial to the present with the aim of, in Chitra Sankaran's words, "decentering the master narratives'" (2012, 17). The novel starts at a point in the future, a 'techno-driven' era with the character of Antar, an Egyptian living in New York, who works for LifeWatch, "a small but respected non-profit organization that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank" (1995, 8). Antar finds the file of previous employee Murugan, an Indian living in the United States, with whom Antar had exchanged peculiar conversations around Murugan's obsession with the history of the malaria cure. The narrator then moves from the very last line of the file on Murugan found by Antar, that reads "Subject missing since August 21, 1995 [...] last seen Calcutta, India" (22), to 20 August 1995 and Murugan's first day in Calcutta. Murugan is there pursuing the secret history behind the discovery of malaria cure, which is credited to the British scientist Ronald Ross, a 1902 Nobel Prize winner. On this day, Murugan meets Urmilla, the Calcutta journalist who will help him disclose part of that hidden history. Urmilla is covering the award ceremony of 85-year-old Phulboni, one of India's most prominent writers, who is giving a speech. The speech refers not only to what Murugan is trying to do with his research, but probably also to Ghosh's main motivation in the novel: "Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed, the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life" (27). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh intends to de-centre the colonial master narrative of scientific progress by locating the discovery of the cure for malaria in the hands of Mangala, the sweeper woman who was helping Ronald Ross' crew in the laboratory, rather than with Ross himself. Through the combination of a historical figure, Ross, and a fictional sweeper woman, Ghosh draws attention to the fact that official history is written by those who have power whereas other stories, such as that of working-class women, are left silent.

Longevity is expressed in Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* in two ways, each questioning the certainty of the western epistemology and self. Firstly, the novel suggests longevity through the close interconnection among characters, since all of them are connected to the history of the cure for malaria in Calcutta at different historical periods; and secondly, through the implication that Murugan's research is also related to the discovery of a specific kind of chromosome, named Calcutta in the novel, that would grant longevity. In the first case, longevity is expressed as the

close interconnectedness of the characters that compose the complexity of the novel. Whereas Antar goes back to Murugan's story and his obsession with finding out about Ronald Ross, Mangala and the cure for malaria, Murugan and Urmila trace the story of Lutchman – a character who appears with several names at different historical times and who was connected to the poet Phulboni – and back to Mangala's work in Ronald Ross' laboratory again. As Ghosh has expressed in some of his interviews, trace is difficult to establish, especially in India's history, but fiction – the novel in this case – somehow manages to do so, just as *The Calcutta Chromosome* does through the connections between characters and stories, and especially through Mangala. Whereas Ronald Ross is introduced in the novel as a British colonial subject who did not really know what to do with his life, went to medical school and started research on malaria because it was the fashionable topic of the times among the medical community, Mangala is described as a "genius". According to Murugan, "she wasn't hampered by the sort of stuff that might slow down someone who was conventionally trained: she wasn't carrying a shit-load of theory in her head, she didn't have to write papers or construct proofs" (243). As John Tieme argues in his analysis of the novel, these different traces that Murugan puts together "involve a counter-epistemology, which promises a form of immortality through the erosion of Western conceptions of discrete subjectivity, through the dismantling of the shadow-line that construct notions of autonomous selfhood" (2003: 136). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh implies that all knowledge is connected and the fact that only a small part of history is recorded does not negate the existence of valuable knowledge that extends from precolonial times to the present. However, such traces are neither linear nor completely reducible to the logics of the (western) scientific method.

This rejection of the certainty of scientific method and its history is emphasised by the second case of longevity in the novel. *The Calcutta Chromosome* poses the possibility that Mangala and the team at her lab have found "immortality" (105) through some kind of "technology for interpersonal transference" (106). As Murugan explains to Antar, "'Now what would you say, Ant,' he asked, 'if all of that information could be transmitted chromosomally, from body to body?'. . . . Just think, a fresh start: when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate – you or at least a matching symptomology of yourself. You begin all over again, another body, another beginning. Just think: no mistakes, a fresh start'" (106). Mangala's discovery, thus, challenges a unified chronological understanding of time and space, as the structure of the novel in which characters seem to survive through other characters similarly exemplifies. According to Chitra Sankaran (2012), the fact that Mangala not only finds the cure for malaria and advances science, but also finds a way of disrupting time and space through the longevity gene, gives meaning to the novel. As Sankaran states, "in the narrative, the sameness of the Self is left "un-circumscribed" and "fluid". Hence, the concept of a linearly progressing Time also permits itself to get ruptured" (2012: 111). As Sankaran's arguments suggest, apart from challenging the western notion of history as linear, logical continuity, the novel also challenges the western notion of self as a coherent and singular entity.

In addition to the trope of longevity, the novel's deployment of the detective narrative is also central in its questioning of the colonial and linear logic. Within

the detective format, the novel brings together different characters from different times connected by the discovery of the cure for malaria. Nonetheless, the mystery of the truth behind the malaria research is not completely solved. The ending of the novel suggests this when Antar encounters many voices as he tries to find out more about Murugan and Urmila by checking some security videos: "There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people was in the room with him. They were saying: 'We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across'" (306). The reference to a multiplicity of voices challenges boundaries both of history and realism. Ghosh, through the impossibility of a clear closure to the detective plot, disrupts the colonial narrative of history at the same time as he rejects the logic of the detective pursuit and the scientific approach. Instead, the only plausible answer to Murugan's, Urmila's and Antar's initial question of who discovered the cure for malaria seems to be a combination of myth and alternative science, in the form of the longevity gene. Seemingly impossibly, Murugan and Antar are connected in the same way as Urmila and Tara, Antar's neighbour and friend. Antar recognises the link between Urmila and Tara when he sees Urmila in the video recording: "Now Murugan was standing in the lobby of a large auditorium and two women were running up the stairs. They came closer and suddenly Antar recognized Tara – except that she was in a sari" (306); thus, Antar realises that Urmila is the female neighbour living across from his flat in New York, Tara, an episode which also points to the plausible existence of that longevity gene personified in the character of Urmila surviving through Tara.

3. *VICTORY CITY*

While *The Calcutta Chromosome* blends longevity, science and detection to enact and explore postcolonial historiography and polytemporality, *Victory City* explicitly engages with India's history as a nation, employing magic realism to create the extraordinarily long-living protagonist, Pampa Kampana, the founder and the chronicler of the Bisnaga empire. In the novel, an un-named, self-reflexive narrator in the present time tells the story of the empire, drawing on a text that is purportedly written by Pampa, who magically creates the empire from seeds and lives for 247 years witnessing and recording its history, until her death on the day that the empire falls. Modelled on the medieval Hindu kingdom, Vijayanagara (Yogalakshmi & Vijayalakshmi 2023), the history of Bisnaga, beginning in the fourteenth century and ending in 1565, spans a time before much of the Indian subcontinent was brought under European control. The book's magic realist narrative combines the mythical and the modern in depicting this period, emphasising the kingdom's transitory status. The novel's interest in the national historiographic project is also emphasised by the way that the book is divided into four parts that are entitled: Birth, Exile, Glory and Fall. The story of Bisnaga, however, does not represent a nostalgic "authentic" pre-colonial India. Instead, just like Bombay in Rushdie's many novels, Bisnaga is a cosmopolitan city that embraces cultural hybridity, a "world-city" (268) embedded in the global movements of goods, people, cultures and texts:

"Trading ships from Bisnaga were traveling everywhere and spreading the news of its wonders, and now foreign visitors – traders, diplomats, explorers – thronged its streets, applauding its beauty and comparing it favourably to Beijing and to Rome" (267). For Ananya Jahanara Kabir, this affirmation of cultural hybridity and tolerance is particularly valuable, coming as it does at a time that marks the 75th year since India's independence and yet in the midst of the rise of Hindu nationalism and its oppressive impact on Indian Muslims (2023). Reading the novel, we see this affirmation of hybridity extending to the way in which it interrogates and seeks to re-imagine India's nationalist historiography through the character of Pampa, the supernaturally long-living "mother of empire" (239).

The conceptualisation of time has been central in the postcolonial historiography of India. In his consideration of historiography in India, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that British colonization meant that the diverse pasts of the subcontinent were reduced into "a homogenizing narrative of transition" that sees India perpetually struggling to move from the past to the present, from traditional to modern times (1992, 5). In this narrative, India stands as a "figure of lack," whose transition to modernity is permanently incomplete (1992, 6). He goes on to explain that in the attempt to counter this meaning of 'lack' while preserving the idea of authentic Indian identity, Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century mobilised gendered spatialisation to locate modernity in the public space and authenticity, and continuity in the private and feminized space of the family. Ira Raja suggests that Indianness was particularly strongly associated with the figure of the mother in the middle-class home, dedicated to the care of the family and the nation (2023, 243). Based on binarisms between past/present, tradition/modernity and private/public, this configuration does not challenge but sustains the linear temporality of the west. More importantly, Raja suggests, this configuration leaves no space for an older woman, seen as a threat to India's progress into modernity. To overcome the static notion of India in linear progressivism, she calls for a recognition of multiple temporalities at the same time, drawing on Helgresson's idea of radical polytemporality, discussed above. Raja finds a literary example that shows an alternative historical imagining of India in the Hindu writer, K. B. Vaid's play, "Our Old Woman." In the play, an old mother uses her silence and ageing body against her younger relatives in ways that insist upon her embodied subjecthood, a subjectivity that questions the ideal of a coherent, unified and young body that is employed in the nationalist and postcolonialist imagining of India's national body. The play then demonstrates the potential of literature for "paving the way for reimagining Indianness as changeable, inessential, and porous" (247).

Similarly to the mother in Vaid's play, with her longevity, Pampa represents the simultaneity of multiple times in her own body and disrupts the linear temporality of the nationalist vision of India. One way she does this is by challenging the genealogical assumptions of the royal dynasty that tends to privilege a patriarchal, singular lineage. As the mother of the empire, who is ambitious, resourceful and powerful, Pampa is far from the self-effacing figure of mother India devoted to the care of the family and, by extension, the nation. When Pampa reaches the age of eighteen, her physical ageing begins to slow down. Her long-lasting youthful and

beautiful appearance allows her to marry or/and serve multiple kings in different generations and exercise her political and magical power to help Bisnaga to thrive. Pampa is also depicted as a woman with her own desires. Her attraction to travellers from the west, in particular, undermines the genealogical authenticity and the patriarchy of the dynasty, exposing hybridity at its heart. While married to Hukka, she gives birth to three daughters conceived with a Portuguese traveller, and their appearance clearly suggests they are not the king's. In these ways, presenting Pampa as a sexually active agential subject, the novel unsettles the gendered discourse of mother India. Furthermore, Pampa's three daughters grow up to be intellectually, physically and mentally exceptional women, whereas her three sons with Bukka, who succeeds Hukka as the king, prove to be far inferior heirs to the throne. Representing and focussing on the powerful matrilineal lineage in the story of Bisnaga, the novel de-centres the patriarchal dynastic lineage that is often the spine of national historiography.

Pampa is also depicted as a figure who is out of time and brings different temporalities into the otherwise linear and singular history of the empire. Her ideas and policies include those that promote women in public spheres, and cultural and religious tolerance in Bisnaga. She is ahead of time; as Bukka tells her, "your ideas are too progressive for the fourteenth century". She replies: "Let it be the fourteenth century everywhere else. It's going to be the fifteenth century here" (91). Her longevity further accentuates her anachronistic existence, as she outlives her children and the many generations of offspring that follow. As is typical in longevity narratives, Pampa experiences a profound sense of loneliness, feeling that "she had lived too long" (244) and becoming redundant or "beside the point" (232). When she is finally prosecuted, upon the order of the then king, her resultant blindness evokes Shakespeare's King Lear, a king who becomes obsolete and vulnerable. Internally, she increasingly feels old and suffers physical aches, but not being able to die, she develops "a sort of sleeping sickness" (309). Just like the mother's ageing body in Vaid's play, Pampa's body becomes a material manifestation of polytemporality in the present, as it holds both youth and age and future and past. This temporal contradiction not only counters the static image of the mother India but also challenges the linear developmental narrative of a nation.

The novel's metafictional and polyphonic narrative also functions to question linear narrative, emphasising the textuality and the narrativity of memories and histories, something that Emily Timms finds in other postcolonial texts, such as Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting* (2020). The novel represents Pampa writing a narrative verse that tells a story of Bisnaga, and the novel opens by framing this written record and establishing its retrospective perspective: "On the last day of her life, when she was two hundred and forty-seven years old… Pampa Kampana completed her immense narrative poem about Bisnaga and buried it in a clay pot… as a message to the future" (1). The narrator of the novel, a self-claimed "spinner of yarns," suggests that this poem is as good and as long as the real, celebrated epic poem, Ramayana, insisting on its alternative and yet legitimate place in the nation's history. And yet, Pampa's story-telling is mediated by the narrator of this novel, the "humble author" (86), who offers his own "poor translation" (116) of some sections

of her Sanskrit text and inserts comments that question the authenticity of Pampa's account, reflecting on the accuracy of his own re-telling.[1] The novel nonetheless closes with Pampa's final words, reiterating the power of story-telling that represents and preserves palimpsestic histories: "I myself am nothing now. All that remains is this city of words. Words are the only victors" (331). Just like Pampa's narrative verse, which has survived four and half centuries to reach the time of the narration of the novel, the novel emphasises the power of story-telling that creates palimpsestic histories.

As the long-living mother of the empire, Pampa symbolises the promise of its continuity but paradoxically, her temporal difference highlights and unsettles the binarisms of past/future and age/youth that underpin the colonialist and nationalist linear histories that see India always in transition to modernity. Representing her anachronistic longevity and her own historiographical act, the novel brings into focus polytemporal and palimpsestic histories and affirms the power of story-telling that creates these, often elusive, histories.

4. *NOSTALGIA*

Nostalgia uses the tropes of science, speculative and dystopian fiction to imagine a future that is, at the same time, an interrogation of the past, in the process exploring history, memory and nationhood. The novel explores technologically-enabled longevity in ways often seen in dystopian fiction through the experiences of psychologist, Dr Frank Sina. Wealthy and privileged citizens, like Frank, have access to technologies that result in physical and cognitive rejuvenation. Moving into reformed and redesigned bodies, recipients experience the erasure of parts of their long-term memory and their replacement with fictions of the past, including new childhoods and familial relations. As is the case in much speculative fiction about extended lifespans, longevity brings about dystopian consequences: class and generational conflict (between older, wealthy rejuvenated persons and younger generations without access to the technology), a sense of anachronism, and forms of generational and familial loneliness. But longevity also enables an interrogation of the individual, communal and national relationship to the past, memory and time through the nostalgia of the title. Those citizens who have benefitted from rejuvenation and now live with fictional pasts find their present lives disrupted by intrusive memories of other pasts, a condition known as nostalgia. In this novel from a writer whose work is persistently concerned with and interrogatory of belonging, home and history, the possibilities of dystopian and science fiction, and the trope of longevity, are used to foreground the "transformative and shifting relations" between past, present and future (Baumbach and Neumann 2023, 8).

[1] The gender of the novel's narrator is not explicitly mentioned, but reviewers of the novel tend to refer to the narrator as male, seeing Rushdie speaking in the voice of this narrator (see Brooks 2023 for example).

The novel draws attention to the complexities of human ageing through its narrative of longevity and nostalgia, unsettling temporal experience at the level of the individual. Age itself becomes a kind of uncertain signifier: Frank is chronologically older than his partner Joanie in his rejuvenated, fictional existence, but he also feels his 'real' age, the length of time he has lived. We eventually learn that he is the great-grandfather of one of the younger, unrejuvenated characters and so has lived through generations. And he feels that sense of age in a kind of bodily memory that exceeds his rejuvenated self-narrative: "I... feel the body-age sometimes, in the nuts and bolts, as it were, the connections and interphases. By law, no record of a person's past life exists, nor of calendar age, but the body knows" (7). The ambiguity of emotional connection to others exacerbates this sense of duality. Though those rejuvenated know that their memories are fictional, they nevertheless form kinds of affective attachment to the fictions, as made clear in Frank's memories of his (fictional) mother. The novel therefore draws attention to the role of the past in existence in the present and in negotiating the future, within the time of a human lifespan. Frank lives a kind of "double" existence where he (increasingly as the text progresses) feels the conflict between his current life narrative and the shadows of previous lives and stories.

This individual experience of temporal uncertainty is only one part of the novel's exploration of the multiple times "that continuously give shape and meaning to human life" (Helgresson 2014, 557). The novel also explores nostalgia at the cultural and national levels. In his discussion of what he calls "postcolonial nostalgias", Dennis Walder argues that it may be necessary to undertake the process of nostalgia, as it "open[s] up a negotiation between the present and the past, leading to a fuller understanding of the past and how it has shaped the present, for good and bad, and how it has shaped the self in connection with others, a task that may bring pain as well as pleasure" (Walder 2010, 9). Moving away from a narrow focus on nostalgia as necessarily a negative and retrograde experience, Walder (and others, such as Hofmeyer) is engaging with the recognition that nostalgia has a complex relationship to time, memory and history. Svetlana Boym's influential discussion of nostalgia similarly explores the human relationship to past and present, making a distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia". The former is about returning to a "lost home"; it is about tradition and "absolute truth" (2001, xviii). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (2001, xviii). Reflective nostalgia, then, recognises the instability of any point of origin, any location of home, and, as Barbara Cassin points out, may encourage a kind of meta-reflection on the notion of home itself (2016, 2-3). It then shares with Helgresson's view of radical polytemporalities an interrogation of any sense of temporal stability and linearity.

Vassanji's novel then offers an exploration of nostalgia that may be characterised as reflective.[2] Nostalgia is the condition experienced by some rejuvenated characters, who find memories of past lives "leak[ing]" into their presents (5). In this new world, the past is a fiction that allows for present existence: "Over time the brain bridges gaps, fudges connections, invents where necessary, and so the actual past disappears. History gets rewritten" (25). As is common in the dystopian novel, this process of fictionalising (or forgetting) the past is controlled by an oppressive ruling force. That could lead the novel to narrativise an idealising nostalgia that tries to create a lost narrative and a lost homeland. But that does not happen here – instead we get something closer to Boym's "reflective nostalgia", which accepts partiality and the combination of loss and recuperation in nostalgia.

Frank is an expert in the treatment of nostalgia, adept at working with his clients to seal off those memories, and his own intrusive thoughts begin as he meets with a new client, Presley, who is experiencing nostalgia himself.[3] The nostalgia experienced by both Frank and Presley is related to a history of colonial conflict that is suppressed by the governing forces in the "North Atlantic Alliance", drawing attention to the politics of remembering and forgetting within post/colonial histories. Frank and Presley suffer the resurfacing of and desire to unearth memories of both time and place, as they are both exiles from previous lives in a different nation. They were brothers Elim and Amirul, sons of a leader of the oppressed and yet rebellious Maskinia, a place behind the "Long Border" (12) that "remains the persistent unknowable alien" (12). Both were taken by forces of the North Atlantic Alliance and forcibly rejuvenated into new lives scripted by the totalitarian forces represented by Dr X. This shared past connects Frank and Presley, but also aligns time and space: memories of the past are, like Maskinia, the "constant dark companion on the bright path of our progress" (12). As Diana Brydon suggests, this alignment suggests a connection between this future imaginary and colonial pasts: "In *Nostalgia*,... the technologies of the future reproduce (and possibly represent) the colonial strategies of control, taken to a higher level". She notes the echoes of the treatment of children in colonial and residential schools in the way that Frank and Presley are rejuvenated into new lives (and ideological frameworks), forced to forget their pasts (Brydon 2019, 104). The exploration of nostalgia in this novel, then, "engages in a similar attention to shifting internal and external borders, mediating between colonialisms old and new, encompassing transnational migration, and ongoing friction between Eurocentric America and its others" (Brydon 2019, 99).

The novel explores reflective nostalgia in two further ways, refusing, like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, to provide character or reader with definitive answers about the past that then determine present and future. The novel, therefore, refrains from

[2] Aris Mousoutzanis and Yugin Teo make the point that SF and speculative writing may be an ideal form for the critical and reflective exploration of nostalgia (2021, 1).

[3] This representation of nostalgia links to the origins of the word in medicine and the assumption that it is "a *curable* medical illness" (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000, 19).

providing hermeneutic satisfaction or a restorative nostalgic drive that would reinstate a sense of certainty about home and history. Firstly, nostalgia is a process that leads to death. Without treatment, the condition can be fatal as the self is unable to bear the combination of fragmented memories of the past and present experiences. Nostalgia is, as Barbara Cassin notes in her discussion of Odysseus, connected to age and ageing (2016). Rejecting Kant's assertion that nostalgia is about a return to an earlier time, that of youth, Cassin argues that Odysseus provides evidence to the contrary: that nostalgia is about the acceptance of mortality and age. In Odysseus' case, "nostalgia chooses finitude and *oikade*, home. To return home is to submit to a common fate: aging, dying" (2016, 13). This is helpful in considering the relationship between age, longevity and generation in *Nostalgia*. What Frank chooses is the rejection of longevity and rejuvenation in favour of mortality and the chaos of memory, and a kind of "homecoming". But, crucially, this is not a romanticised or idealised return home. Both Presley and Frank know that accepting nostalgia is a kind of self-annihilation.

Secondly, the novel's narrative structure insists upon uncertainty and unreliability, echoing the narrative instability of *Victory City*. The novel is Frank's retrospective account of his own development and change of perspective (as he uncovers his own previous identity), his attempt to counter the control of narratives of past and present held by the authorities. The prologue is important here, as we are made aware of Frank's future vantage point, "when it's all over..." (1) and he "wait[s] out [his] time" (1). The novel itself is then made up of Frank's account of the time leading up to his death (and that of Presley), within which are embedded his speculative accounts of the experiences of Presley and Holly Chu, a young reporter who is kidnapped and later dies in Maskinia. Frank's reflections and the notebook entries are initially kept electronically, but, in typical dystopian fashion, he later moves to handwriting to avoid surveillance, in this case of "Tom", the AI (154) – who himself may be some form of "transitioned" human (254). The final chapter functions as a kind of epilogue that underlines the power of the authorities in this new world, as well as reinforcing the instability of Frank's account. Taking the form of a conversation between Dr X and Tom, the dialogue suggests that Frank's imagined account of Holly Chu and Presley was 83% correct (257), a determination made, of course, according to the logic of the powers of the North Atlantic Alliance. This final chapter makes clear that Frank's account is now in the hands of the authorities and not, therefore, distributed to others. Given the long tradition of metafictive conclusions of this nature in dystopian fiction, it does not suggest hope for change (see Moylan 2020), but at the same time it does suggest the value of nostalgia as a reflective rather than restorative process (Boym 2001), one that emphasises the instability of all narratives of the past, and the relationship between past, present and future.

5. CONCLUSION

Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023) all, and in different ways, deploy the trope of longevity. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, longevity seems to have enabled survival through some form of bodily transference, perhaps due to Mangala's discovery, although this is never clearly stated. Rushdie's *Victory City* does not explain Pampa's astounding, seemingly magical, longevity, whereas in *Nostalgia*, medical and technological advancements enable many to enjoy radically extended lifespans. At a narrative level, these extended lifespans bring these characters existential angst and fragmentation of self, the effects that Mangum (2002) associates with radical extension of life. More pertinently for our reading in these three texts, longevity serves as a narrative device for the exploration of history and time. They exploit the trope of longevity and the possibilities of speculative, science and fantasy fiction in ways that unsettle linear temporality and embrace polytemporality. Representing shifting, multiple and entangled temporalities, these texts resist the binarisms of self/other, modern/pre-modern and old/new that have underpinned Europe's colonialism. *The Calcutta Chromosome* produces a narrative that combines speculative and detective genres to connect characters across spatial and temporal boundaries, inviting the reader to follow the traces of these connections, just as Antar does within the text. By interrogating colonial scientific logic and refusing neat narrative resolutions, however, the text embraces a polytemporality that de-centres colonialist historiography and epistemology. Similarly concerned with historiography, *Victory City* utilises magic realism to imagine India before Europe's colonialisation and a supernaturally long-living character to challenge the dominant and gendered historical narrative of India that dichotomises the modern/the premodern and new/old, depicting complex and anachronistic temporalities that emphasise both the power and instability of storytelling. *Nostalgia* explores identity, memory and time through characters whose extended lives continue across generations and nations. It explores the reflective nostalgia that recognises the constructed and unfixed natures of identity and memory, while rejecting the restorative nostalgia that turns to the past as a fixed point of origin of identity and memory. In these differing ways, the three novels invite the reader to imagine time differently, recognising multiple and entangled temporalities that exist simultaneously, and that shape lived experiences in local and global contexts.

Reviews sent to the authors: 3/05/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 14/06/2026

WORKS CITED

Baumbach, Sibylle, & Birgit Neumann. 2023. "Whose Temporalities? Which Crises?: Temporalities in/of crisis in Anglophone Literatures." In *Temporalities in/of crisis in Anglophone Literatures*. 1-21. Routledge.

Botelho, Teresa. 2023. "Remaking Ourselves: Age, Death and Techno-Bodies in the Fiction of Transhumanist Immortality." In *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction*, ed. Sarah Falcus & Maricel Oró-Piqueras. 9-28. Bloomsbury.

Bould, Mark, & Sherryl Vint. 2011. "Problems of definition". In *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould & Sherryl Vint. 1-19. Taylor and Francis.

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books.

Brand, Mark. R. 2016. "Growing Old in Utopia: From Age to Otherness in American Literary Utopias." *Age, Culture and Humanities* 3: 163-187.

Brydon, Diana. 2019. "Risk, Mortality, and Memory: The Global Imaginaries of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, and André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs.*" *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 78: 97-112. https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2019.78.07.

Cassin, Barbara. 2016. *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?* Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault. Fordham UP.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1992. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37: 1-26.

Clark, Stephen. R. L. 1995. *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy*. Routledge.

Elias, Norbert. 1985. *The Loneliness of the Dying*. Basil Blackwell.

Ezeiyoke, Chukwunonso. 2025. *Nigerian Speculative Fiction: The Evolution*. Routledge.

Falcus, Sarah, & Maricel ORÓ-PIQUERAS. 2023. "Ageing and Generation in Recent Narratives of Longevity." In *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction*. 49-70. Bloomsbury.

Frow, John. 2006. *Genre*. Routledge.

Ghosh, Amitav. 1995. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Avon Books.

Gunning, Dave. 2013. *Postcolonial Literature*. Edinburgh UP.

Helgresson, Stefan. 2014. "Radicalizing Temporal Difference: Anthropology, Postcolonial Theory and Literary Time." *History and Theory* 53(4): 545-562.

Hutcheon, Linda, & Mario J. Valdés. 2000. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue." *Poligrafías* 3: 18-41.

Isaacson, Nathaniel. 2017. *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP.

Jameson, Frederic. 2005. "Longevity as Class Struggle." In *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. 328-344. Verso.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. 2023. "Grooving on at Seventy-Five: Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Rushdie, and the Indian Muslim's Ecstatic Return." *South Asian Review* 45(1-2): 6-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2023.2262789.

Khilnani, Shweta, & Ritwich Bhattacharjee. 2022. *Science Fiction in India: Parallel Worlds and Postcolonial Paradigms* Bloomsbury.

Langer, Jessica. 2011. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lebow, Richard Ned. 2012. *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves*. Cambridge UP.

Li, Hua. 2021. *Chinese Science Fiction During the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw*. U of Toronto P.

Mangum, Teresa. 2002. "Longing for Life Extension: Science Fiction and Late Life." *Journal of Aging and Identity* 7(2): 69-80.

Mousoutzanis, Aris, & Yugin Teo. 2021. "Nostalgia Science Fiction at 2020." *Science Fiction Studies* 48(1): 1-7.

Moylan, Tom. (2020). *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*. Bloomsbury.

Raja, Ira. 2023. "Nation and Ageing: Mother India's Mutable Body." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film,* ed. Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung & Raquel Medina. 239-254. Bloomsbury.

Rieder, John. 2008. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction.* Wesleyan UP.

Rieder, John. 2010. "On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History." *Science Fiction Studies* 37(2): 191-209.

Rushdie, Salman. 2023. *Victory City*. Jonathan Cope.

Sankaran, Chitra. 2012. "Sharing landscapes and mindscapes." In *History, narrative, and testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*, ed. Chitra Sankaran. 109-120. State UP.

Slusser, Georg, Westfahl, Gary, & Eric S. Rabkin, eds. 1996. *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy.* U of Georgia P.

Smith, Eric D. 2012. *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan

Song, Mingwei, & Theodore Huters. 2018. *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction*. Columbia UP.

Tieme. John Ed. 2003. "The Discovered Discovered. Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome.*" In *Amitav Ghosh. A Critical Companion*, ed. T. Khair. 110-128. Orient Longman Private.

Timms. Emily. 2020. "I Could Turn Viper Tomorrow": Challenging Reproductive Futurism in Merle Collins's The Colour of Forgetting." In *Literature and Ageing*, ed. E. Barry & M.V. Skagen. 105-128. D.S. Brewer.

Vassanji, M.G. 2016. *Nostalgia. A Novel*. Penguin.

Walder, Dennis. 2010. *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory*. Taylor & Francis.

We, Jeong Eun Annabel. 2024. "On Faith and Fabulation: Decolonial Thought, Speculative Fiction". In *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial and Decolonial Literature*, edited by Praseeda Gopinath, and Laura Brueck. Routledge. 456-475.

Ygolakshmi, D. and Vijayalakshmi, Sadasivan. 2023. "The gifts in animating the past to the present as tales of remembrance: a comparative study of Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* and Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*", *World Journal of English Literature*, 13 (7): 292-297.

Yoke, Carl B. and Hassler, Donald M., eds. 1985. *Death and the Serpent: Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Greenwood.

(RE)MAPPING GENDERED GEOGRAPHIES IN NATIVE WOMEN'S NON-FICTION: THE POETICS OF VULNERABILITY IN TERESE MARIE MAILHOT'S MEMOIR

Rosa Segarra Montero
Universitat de València

Abstract

This article explores the representation of child sexual abuse (CSA) in *Heart Berries: A Memoir* (2019) by Seabird Island Band member Terese Marie Mailhot through the lens of vulnerability studies. It argues that Mailhot mobilises her wounded subjectivity and inhabits vulnerability as a site of critical resistance, operating at the intersection of the embodied and the structural. Drawing on Tonawanda Band of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman's (2013) concept of "(re) mapping" and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson's (2017) project of "radical resurgence," the article examines how Indigenous epistemologies counter colonial systems of health inequity and gendered violence. It foregrounds the lived experiences of Indigenous female CSA survivors by distinguishing two forms of vulnerability: embodied vulnerability (manifesting in physical and psychological symptoms) and structural vulnerability (manifesting at the communal and systemic levels). By forging a link between Indigenous feminist thought and vulnerability studies, the article contributes to broader debates in literary and cultural studies, proposing a decolonial framework from which to approach CSA in both its intimate and systemic dimensions.

Keywords: Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries*, Vulnerability studies, Indigenous feminism, Child sexual abuse (CSA), Trauma.

(RE)CONFIGURACIÓN DE GEOGRAFÍAS DE GÉNERO EN LA NO FICCIÓN DE MUJERES NATIVAS: LAS POÉTICAS DE LA VULNERABILIDAD EN LAS MEMORIAS DE TERESE MARIE MAILHOT

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación del abuso sexual infantil (ASI) en *Heart Berries: A Memoir* (2019), de Terese Marie Mailhot, miembro de la Seabird Island Band, a través del marco de los estudios de la vulnerabilidad. Se sostiene que Mailhot moviliza su subjetividad herida y habita la vulnerabilidad como un espacio de resistencia crítica, situado en la intersección de lo corporal y lo estructural. A partir del concepto de "(re)mapping" de la investigadora Tonawanda Band of Seneca Mishuana Goeman (2013) y del proyecto de "radical resurgence" de la académica Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Leanne Simpson (2017), el artículo examina cómo las epistemologías indígenas contrarrestan los sistemas coloniales de desigualdad sanitaria y violencia de género. El texto pone en primer plano las experiencias vividas de las supervivientes indígenas de ASI al distinguir dos formas de vulnerabilidad: la vulnerabilidad encarnada (que se manifiesta en síntomas físicos y psicológicos) y la vulnerabilidad estructural (que se manifiesta en los niveles comunitario y sistémico). Al vincular el pensamiento feminista indígena con los estudios de la vulnerabilidad, se propone un marco decolonial para abordar el ASI en sus dimensiones íntimas y estructurales.

Palabras clave: Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries,* estudios de la vulnerabilidad, feminismo indígena, abuso sexual infantil (ASI), trauma.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.10
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 191-218; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. REMAPPING INDIGENOUS PRECARITY AND RESURGENCE: TOWARD A VULNERABILITY STUDIES FRAMEWORK

In an interview on *The Daily Show* (2018), Seabird Island Band member Terese Marie Mailhot stresses the importance of listening to Indigenous voices and, more concretely, Indigenous *female* voices. She elaborates on how *Heart Berries*, first published in 2018, is the embodiment of her mother's voice. It is her mother's voice inscribed on the page, not her own. Mailhot further claims that her memoir is directed to all those women victims of sexual violence. Witness of her mother's history of marital rape and survivor of child sexual abuse (CSA) herself, she speaks for the missing, murdered and raped women on the paper, chants for them, against a colonial continuum of physical and textual erasure.

In light of the widespread and persistent gender-based violence targeting Indigenous women and children, Mailhot's language is deeply corporeal, infused with expressions of physical deficiency, spiritual fragmentation, psychological and sexual dysfunction, and self-loathing. She articulates history and present reality through embodied experiences and sensations that are remembered, stored, transmitted, and intergenerationally inherited among Indigenous women, akin to the transmission of genetic material. Mailhot (2019) explicitly states that she carries the "blood memory" of her "neurotic ancestors and their vices" (32). In this framework, history, memory, and Indigenous female bodies emerge as integral elements of contemporary Native American identity: relational, multidimensional, and embodied.

This invocation of history as inscribed on the body resonates with N. Scott Momaday's concept of "blood memory," first introduced in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). At the time controversial, Momaday's trope reclaims and redefines the U.S. political construct of blood quantum, a tool historically used to systematise, restrict, and delegitimise Indigenous identity. Instead, the author's concept reframes American Indian identity and authenticity through acts of remembering and recollection, both individual and collective. While Mailhot's invocation of "blood memory" is rooted in this Momadayan lineage, she extends the concept further to encompass the genetic transmission of female bodily pain. As Chadwick Allen (1999) observes, "the contemporary Indian writer renders himself coincident with indigenous ancestors and with indigenous history –and makes available to readers both that indigenous past and his contemporary identity as *indigenous*– through strategies of narrative re-membering and transgenerational address" (101, italics in original). Mailhot's work exemplifies such a strategy, enacting a form of embodied narrative memory that links personal trauma to collective Indigenous experience.

The Indigenous body as both metaphor and vessel of cultural coding and collective memory has been a recurring theme in Native memoirs by female authors. In *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (2001), Linda Hogan reflects: "I don't know how the body remembers and contains the past, but it does" (46). Similarly, Jace Weaver (2001) notes that "such cultural coding exists finally beyond conscious remembering, so deeply ingrained and psychologically embedded as to be capable of being spoken of as 'in the blood'" (8). Building on this idea, Opaskwayak Cree

Nation scholar Gregory Younging (2009) explains that Indigenous peoples often invoke blood memory to refer to "the experience of those that have gone before us", which is "embedded in [their] physical and psychological being" (327). While Mailhot does not advocate for genetic determinism, she draws on what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, storyteller, musician, and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016) terms "reciprocal recognition." This concept becomes a means through which Mailhot affirms the intimate interconnection and mutual reliance among Indigenous women. Through this framework, she identifies with and locates herself within a continuum of female coresistance and textual vulnerability, positioning her narrative as both personal testimony and collective inheritance.

As Alyson Cole (2016) observes, although vulnerability is an elastic and contextually variable concept, contemporary vulnerability studies are particularly concerned with "the unboundedness of bodies," emphasising "corporeality" and "radical openness" (261). She defines vulnerability as a "shared, constitutive and connective feature of our existence that encompasses not merely susceptibility to harm but also receptivity to positive forms of intersubjectivity" (261). Scholars in this field recognise endemic vulnerability as intrinsic to the human condition, what Martha Fineman (2013) describes as "at the core of what it means to be human" (20). However, the epistemic fear of vulnerability, or the cultural imperative toward invulnerability, has, as Cole (2016) argues, "instigated some of the most violent acts by individuals and the state" (262). The binary construction of invulnerability versus vulnerability not only reinforces gendered frameworks through which health and strength are mischaracterised but also upholds "social hierarchies that accompany fixed identities anchored in juridical forms" (Cole 2016, 261). Within this framework, vulnerability studies offer a powerful lens for rehumanising healthcare by foregrounding the ethical, emotional, and social dimensions of illness. By interrogating how narratives, identities, and systemic power relations converge in moments of medical vulnerability, this field exposes the limitations of purely biomedical models. Instead, it advocates for a more compassionate, reflexive, and relational approach to care, one that is grounded in awareness, interconnectedness, and social justice.

Scholars in vulnerability studies often explore the dialogical relationship between cultural narratives and medical practice, interrogating how concepts of health and illness are not only shaped by cultural frameworks but also represented and contested in literature, history, cinema, and other cultural texts. Informed by Critical Race Theory and other strands of critical thought, vulnerability studies further examine the entanglements of structural violence, health inequity, and medical practice in fields such as obstetrics, rheumatology, and pharmacology, among others. In relation to structural racism and health disparities in medicine, Malika Sharma (2018) contends that "the positioning of the patient as 'subaltern' can provide channels of resistance against traditional power asymmetries" (1). Indeed, the act of "centering the margins," in Paulo Freire's terms, has become a foundational tenet of critical consciousness within a growing body of literature informed by Critical Race Theory that is shaping the evolving landscape of vulnerability studies (2017, 74).

In dominant discourse, vulnerability is frequently associated with negative attributes, "disabling qualities and diminished capacities, including underdevelopment, abject poverty, conspiracy, violation, injury, harm, weakness, susceptibility, fragility, deficiency, dependency and helplessness" (Cole 2016, 264). Yet Fineman (2013) insists that vulnerability must be decoupled from notions of "victimhood, deprivation, dependency and pathology" (128). Crucially, Indigenous non-fiction, and particularly life writing, as I will further develop in this article, can serve an important socio-pedagogical function by restoring subjectivity and agency in the aftermath of sexual violence. These narratives challenge Western constructions of victimhood, passivity, and *survivorism* (a term coined by Sarah Ropp 2019), which often frame vulnerability as incompatible with resistance or agency. Tanana Athabascan author Dian Million (2013) describes this process as the articulation of *wounded subjectivity*, "an agonistic site in the affective and moral power relations wherein Indigenous peoples articulate their self-determination within a neoliberal Canada" (6). Articulating this subjectivity and vulnerability as sexual violence and subsequent trauma, "Indigenous peoples have come to use forms that originate internationally to locally locate themselves as the interlocutors of their own experience" (Million 2013, 7). In this way, Indigenous autobiography becomes an act of bearing witness to medical, historical, and cultural injustices, an imaginative and affective practice of remembering, recrafting, and remapping both personal and collective myths through what may be termed *textual vulnerability*. As Métis writer Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) contends, *myth* itself is an act of imagination: a means of re-envisioning the self and community in the face of embodied and structural violence.

Indigenous female victims and survivors of CSA remain underrepresented in clinical and longitudinal studies, as well as in theoretical models of disclosure, which tend to focus predominantly on Caucasian female victims, their subsequent psychological symptomatology, and disclosure as a homogeneous process. The experiences of Native women with rape are insufficiently addressed within legal scholarship and academia. Many contemporary studies on the intersection of race and rape (following Sarah Deer's definition of rape 2015) have largely overlooked the lived experiences of Native women, often dismissing them as unworthy of critical attention. Yet, the literature confirms that Indigenous female victims of sexual violence face substantial barriers when attempting to disclose their abuse compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, although the role of culture in CSA disclosure remains an area requiring ongoing research. These additional barriers include, but are not limited to: poor social networks; isolation of tribal villages; fear of further discrimination, stigmatisation, and marginalisation by law enforcement officers, medical personnel, and mental health professionals; a high incidence of systemic police brutality and criminality (such as physical and sexual abuse of victims by police officers during arrest and custody); distrust of mainstream medicine; severe socioeconomic deprivation; and limited geographical access to services addressing CSA (Braithwaite 2018; Collin-Vézina et al 2009; Deer 2015; Human Rights Watch 2013; Tolliday 2020). Furthermore, Indigenous female victims of CSA and other forms of sexual violence are at elevated risk of experiencing factors such as intimate

partner violence (IPV), adolescent pregnancy, sexual risk-taking behaviours (e.g., ineffective contraceptive use, substance use prior to sex, multiple partners), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and revictimisation (Assink et al 2019).

The literature has thus confirmed that Indigenous female victims of CSA constitute a vulnerable population, exhibiting a heightened "susceptibility" to the aforementioned risk factors. In clinical research, the term "vulnerable" is typically applied to individuals who "are unable to give informed consent or who are susceptible to coercion" (Ruof 2004, 412). However, within medical research and healthcare, the concept of "vulnerability" and the criteria used to designate vulnerable populations remain uncontested territory. While some scholars argue that the term inherently carries sexist and paternalistic connotations, reinforcing embodied otherness and oppression, others contend that vulnerability can serve as a useful qualifier and guiding principle within bioethics (Ruof 2004). Furthermore, it can effectively capture crucial aspects of marginalised and stigmatised groups. Indeed, social injustices such as structural racism and socioeconomic marginalisation contribute to health inequities, thus rendering certain populations vulnerable to adverse health outcomes, including morbidity and premature mortality.

In the case of Indigenous women, the existing literature has thoroughly demonstrated that they are at greater risk of experiencing a range of health issues, including diabetes and gestational diabetes, obstetric violence, severe maternal morbidity and mortality, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, and cervical cancer, among others (Vasilevska et al 2012; Voaklander et al 2020; Kozhimannil et al 2020). Maria Evans-Campbell (2008) argues that Indigenous women suffer, among other conditions, from chronic low-level depression as a consequence of colonial policies and historical trauma (HT). Similarly, Jo-Ann Episkenew observes that the myth of white supremacy and the consequent exclusion of Indigenous peoples from national collective myths constitute a health determinant for them, a form of "psychological terrorism" that is internalised and may culminate in profound "dislocation and alienation," as well as "self-loathing" (2009, 71-72). James Pennebaker, meanwhile, emphasises that racial discrimination results in both physical harm and psychological stress. He asserts that "the dangers of being discriminated against go far beyond psychological stress, including higher-than-average rates of heart disease and other health problems. Infant mortality, alcohol and drug problems, and even death due to suicide and murder are significantly higher than average" (qtd Episkenew 2009, 9). In this vein, Sarah de Leeuw and Margo Greenwood (2018) have examined how the colonial construction of Indigenous identity has translated into substantial health disparities, positioning colonialism itself as a social determinant of health in Canada. As these authors note, Canada's colonial project, encompassing policies, laws, strategies, and colonial notions of indigeneity linked to depraved sexuality and promiscuity (see Lesley Erikson's analysis of Prairie law 2011), is inextricably connected to the poor health outcomes experienced by Indigenous peoples today.

Historically mediated institutionalised racism, alongside the cumulative effects of violence, economic marginalisation, urbanisation, and related factors, all shape the lived experiences of Indigenous women, particularly those who are victims

of sexual violence. Indigenous women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable to all forms of gendered violence and, simultaneously, remain unprotected by federal and provincial authorities, as well as by legislation and jurisdictional barriers that impede the prosecution and incarceration of sexual predators (Deer 2015). Aboriginal women have historically and culturally been portrayed as inherently sexually violable and disposable, biologically predisposed to physical, sexual, and verbal abuse (Papalia 2015; Smith 2003). Legal dispossession and vulnerability must therefore be understood as inextricably linked to violent physical dispossession, frequently manifesting as sexual abuse. Consequently, vulnerability must be framed through an intersectional lens to examine why certain individuals and communities are more susceptible to health deficits, as well as the social, political, and legislative contexts within which these health disparities arise.

On the level of what Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015) calls *vulnerable texts*, Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández (2023) claim that contemporary texts, as well as contemporary subjects, are concerned with vulnerability as a "relational ontology with an emphasis on porosity or liquidity –echoing Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization– of geopolitical boundaries...rather than differential totality," thus giving rise to an "ecology of vulnerability" (5). Indeed, vulnerability studies are replete with academic publications that reveal insight into "the social ethics of vulnerability and mutual care" on the intersections of literature and medicine (Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández 2023, 5). This perspective is indelibly linked to the idea of relationality in Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), the way to combat the violence of settler colonialism as a gendered structure is through relation and connection, "a coded layering of intimate interconnection and interdependence that creates an algorithmic network of presence, reciprocity, consent and freedom" (185). She places the eradication of gender violence, from rape, forced sterilisation and genital mutilation to racial microaggressions, as the central project of radical resurgence, and centers the voices of children, women, and 2SQ people as a mechanism through which to build systems of agency, consent, and sovereignty, both on the political and corporeal level. Resurgence must be understood as a generative response to counter the massive dispossession and extermination of Indigenous people. It signifies "the process of returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out" (Simpson 2017, 17). In the context of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) awareness campaign, Simpson's work operates as powerful manifesto, thus confronting the enduring legacy of sexual violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities by the Canadian state. As Simpson incisively argues, "the murdering, disappearing, and erasing of Indigenous women is necessary for Canada to secure and legitimize its sovereignty because they house and reproduce Indigenous political orders" (2017, 115).

Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's conceptualisation of survivance, Tonawanda Band of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013) introduces the notion of "(re) mapping" to "connote the fact that in (re)mapping, Native women employ traditional and new tribal stories as a means of continuation" (3). Goeman (2013) defines (re) mapping as "the labour Native authors and the communities they write within and

about undertake, in the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making, to generate new possibilities" (3). I argue that, in *Heart Berries*, Terese Marie Mailhot engages in a process of (re)mapping Native presence, offering testimony to the lived experiences of Indigenous women and rejecting colonial medical structures that pathologise Indigenous bodies, particularly those marked by mobility and resistance. In alignment with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's model of radical resurgence, Mailhot foregrounds a network of Indigenous female intellectuals who resist the heteropatriarchal frameworks that render female illness and pathology as apolitical, depersonalised, and commodifiable. In doing so, she challenges the objectification of Indigenous women's suffering and asserts agency through narrative. This aligns with Natalie Clark's (2016) notion of "word warriors," a term she uses to describe women, from young girls to established writers, who speak out against "violence at the intersections of Indigeneity, gender, age and geography since colonisation began," a practice that "facilitates and allows for relational witnessing and accountability" (2-3).

As such, this work contributes to the ongoing struggle against gender-based violence in Aboriginal communities in Canada by offering a critical analysis of Terese Marie Mailhot's memoir, which centers on her experience of child sexual abuse (CSA). In the context of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, as well as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) awareness campaign, Indigenous female survivors of CSA continue to be discredited, frequently accused of fabrication, their memories deemed unreliable, and consequently silenced. Mailhot breaks through this culture of silence with urgency and force, exposing the long-standing patterns of sexual violence, systemic repression, and the colonial project of erasure targeting Indigenous women. Drawing on Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Karina Walters' elaboration of historical trauma (HT) and particularly inspired by Evans-Campbell's (2008) model of its effects across three distinct yet interrelated levels, this article identifies two forms of vulnerability in CSA cases: embodied vulnerability (manifested through physical and psychological symptoms) and structural vulnerability (rooted in community-level conditions).

This article thus argues that Mailhot's embodied language and poetics of vulnerability articulate intertwined personal and collective histories of matrilineal suffering, that is, the transmission of trauma and pain across generations of Indigenous women, by reclaiming agency via an Indigenous feminist epistemology grounded in relationality, embodiment, and memory. On the other hand, by drawing on Goeman's (2013) conceptualisation of (re)mapping, this article interprets *Heart Berries* as a potent counter-discursive intervention that destabilises the commodification and pathologisation of Indigenous female bodies. In doing so, Mailhot resists biomedical reductionism and reclaims the Indigenous female body, particularly in the aftermath of sexual violence, as a cartography of survivance and relational knowledge production. This paper ultimately contends that vulnerability studies possess transformative potential to rehumanise healthcare by subverting colonial medical paradigms and privileging Indigenous autobiography as a site of resistance, relationality, and Indigenous sovereignty.

2. THE VULNERABILITY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (CSA) IN CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS NON-FICTION

Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries* (2019) serves as a written testimony of her history of child sexual abuse (CSA) and neglect. Suffering from dissociative amnesia and severe psychological, behavioural, and spiritual sequelae, Mailhot's text constitutes a practice in language and an attempt to create a verbal account of previously disjointed memories. While the narrative may initially appear to center solely on Mailhot herself, it ultimately emerges as a painful elegy to her mother, Karen Joyce Bopp (Wahzinak). Mailhot reconciles herself to the fact that her mother, just like her, was also a victim and sufferer of a pain and grief that the author describes as "feminine and ancestral in its misery" (2019, 18). Replete with both excruciating and immensely moving memories, Mailhot unfolds her life story and crudely recounts the loss of her older son to social services, her multiple suicide attempts, her abusive relationship with a white man, her commitment to a mental hospital, and her training as a gifted writer, as she recovers old memories of her mother, which serve as a healing factor in her narrative. Retrieving lost memories along the way, remembering her mother and grieving her death includes taking her place as storyteller to retell both painful and healing stories of survival, and this becomes Mailhot's storytelling ceremony and written medicine.

Mailhot's text is both expansive in scope and ambitious in its endeavour to articulate a clear link between her physical and psychological symptomatology, and the emotional, historical, and structural forces that constitute her subjectivity. Employing a fragmentary and affectively charged narrative form, the work illuminates the extent to which the experience of illness is inextricable from systemic violences, that is, racial, gendered, and colonial, that inscribe themselves upon the body and mediate the lived experience of pain. Her body emerges as a cartography of pain, wherein the imprints of sexual violence are inscribed, mapping a fertile terrain shaped not only by individual trauma but also intersecting and expanding structures of power, memory, and gendered embodiment. She is rendered visibly vulnerable to Western commodification: forced to embody the *squaw* trope, subjected to biomedical treatment, and entangled in fraught, unfulfilling intimacies with white men, her only remaining tool is the act of remembering, remapping her presence not solely as victim or survivor, but as an Indigenous woman, writer, and academic.

Mailhot weaponises her wounded subjectivity, deliberately dwelling in vulnerability as a site of critical resistance, which operates at the intersection of two distinct yet interrelated levels: the embodied and the structural. Interestingly, this framework closely aligns with Evans-Campbell's theory on historical trauma (2008 HT) as impacting on three distinct, but interrelated, levels: the individual, the familial, and the communal. Responses at the individual level fall within the context of mental and physical health, and may include symptoms of "PTSD and guilt, anxiety, grief, and depressive symptomatology" (Evans-Campbell 2008, 322). On the other hand, responses at the familial level may include "impaired family communication and stress around parenting" (Evans-Campbell 2008, 322). Finally, responses at the community level may include "the breakdown of traditional culture and values, the

loss of traditional rites of passage, high rates of alcoholism, high rates of physical illness (e.g., obesity), and internalized racism" (Evans-Campbell 2008, 322).

While structural vulnerability, shaped by colonial policies, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma, undoubtedly affects Indigenous women's health and safety, this article foregrounds *embodied vulnerability* as most vividly expressed in Mailhot's memoir. The structural dimension has been documented in public health and sociological research (see Daily 1987; Aboriginal Women's Council of Saskatchewan 1989; Hodgson 1990; Vézina, Dion, & Trocmé 2009; Helmus & Kyne 2023), yet Mailhot's testimony powerfully demonstrates how systemic violence is inscribed on the body through symptoms of psychological illness, self-harm, dissociative amnesia, and colonised silence, among others. By focusing on *embodiment*, I intend to highlight how her narrative translates collective histories of trauma into corporeal language without losing sight of the broader cultural and structural forces at work.

For the purpose of this article and inspired by Evans-Campbell's theory on historical trauma (HT), I argue that the symptomatology experienced by Indigenous female survivors of CSA must be recognised as multilayered and multidimensional, and cannot be equated with the experiences of white or settler-descended survivors. CSA within Indigenous communities is deeply intertwined with the intergenerational transmission of trauma and sexual violence, and cannot be approached as a singular, monolithic phenomenon. Rather, Indigenous women's experiences intersect with a complex constellation of factors: intergenerational trauma, geographic and cultural isolation, forced relocation and assimilation, systemic cultural oppression, the fragmentation of community life, the intergenerational legacies of residential schools (including the repetition of physical and sexual abuse), unemployment, domestic violence, and family breakdown. These intersecting forms of harm contribute to significant barriers to disclosure, including feelings of shame and guilt, familial dysfunction, fear of stigmatisation, and a lack of trust in external support systems.

3. EMBODIED VULNERABILITY IN TERESE MARIE MAILHOT'S MEMOIR

Higher rates of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts have been consistently reported among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples compared to non-Indigenous populations in Canada. Indigenous communities experience psychological distress ranging from moderate to severe mental health disorders, with factors such as geographical location, age, and gender playing significant roles in shaping these outcomes (Kumar and Tjepkema 2019). The Canadian government's assimilation policies, including the Indian Act of 1876, the infiltration of patriarchal structures, the introduction of devastating diseases such as smallpox and influenza following European contact, the establishment of residential schools, child abduction, the operation of the child welfare system, enforced religious conversion, and the prohibition of Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices, have all contributed to the intergenerational

transmission of violence. This ongoing legacy continues to elevate the risk of CSA among Indigenous children (Thornton 1987). Patrick Wolfe (1999) describes this as a "genocidal logic of elimination," whereby direct homicide is supplanted by subtler, yet systemic bureaucratic practices aimed at the outright erasure of Indigeneity within settler colonial societies.

The theory of colonisation posits that the heightened risk of sexual violence experienced by Indigenous peoples is a direct consequence of the enduring effects of historical trauma, also referred to as soul wound, historical legacy, the American Indian holocaust, or intergenerational posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Scholars such as Duran and Duran, alongside Brave Heart and Horse-Davis, define historical trauma (HT) as "trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time", often accompanied by "acculturative stress," a form of distress rooted in the process of acculturation (Duran et al 1998, 342-343). This acculturative stress manifests through a range of behaviours, including internalised oppression, anxiety, depression, feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion (Duran et al 1998, 343).

Episkenew (2009) expands upon this framework, arguing that the symptomatology of acculturative stress frequently includes violence, not typically directed at settlers, but rather turned inward or towards one's family and community, as well as addiction, employed as a form of self-medication to temporarily alleviate the despair born of personal and political powerlessness (8-9). Duran and Duran (1995) further assert that diagnostic frameworks should incorporate a category reflecting "the effects of genocide," proposing terms such as "acute or chronic reaction to genocide and colonialism," as conventional PTSD diagnoses fail to adequately capture the unique nature and scope of Indigenous trauma (1995, 6, 53). Building on this, Episkenew draws on Kuna/Rappahannock playwright Monique Mojica's concept of present-day trauma and ethno-stress to suggest the term "postcolonial traumatic stress response" as a more comprehensive descriptor of Indigenous peoples' diverse and complex reactions to historical trauma (2009, 9). Given that elevated rates of family violence in Aboriginal communities in Canada are a prominent manifestation of historical trauma (HT), it is crucial to recognise intergenerational transmission of violence (IGTV) as a key contributing factor to CSA in these communities. Supporting this, Horejsi and colleagues (1992) propose that the traumatic experiences endured in residential schools may have disproportionately entrenched harmful child-rearing practices, thereby perpetuating detrimental parenting behaviours, among them, CSA, across generations.

Global research on the prevalence of CSA identifies it as a significant and ongoing public health concern, with approximately 18-20% of females and 8-10% of males reporting experiences of sexual abuse (World Health Organization 2023). One in five women report having been sexually abused during childhood, although literature consistently confirms that the vast majority of CSA cases go unreported or fail to reach the attention of relevant authorities (World Health Organization 2024). In Indigenous communities across Canada, children experience CSA at rates six times higher than the national average.

CSA can be defined as "a complex constellation of experiences that involve an adult or older child using a child for sexual gratification and can include, but is not limited to, rape, unwanted touching, threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, and use of children in pornography or sex work" (World Health Organization 2017). Angela Browne and David Finkelhor (1986) argue that CSA consists of "two overlapping but distinguishable types of interaction: (a) forced or coerced sexual behavior imposed on a child, and (b) sexual activity between a child and a much older person, whether or not obvious coercion is involved" (66). They list four categories of injury that CSA brings to victims and survivors: developmental dysfunction (traumatic sexualisation deriving in identity confusion); a sense of betrayal (which may lead to depression, rage and anger issues); stigmatisation, shame and guilt; and disempowerment (personal agency is erased by force).

The literature on the enduring effects of CSA among Caucasian adult female survivors is extensive (Gelinas 1983; Browne & Finkelhor 1986; Alexander & Anderson 1998; Gold et al 1999; Putnam 2003; Walsh, Fortier, & DiLillo 2010). Psychological, social, behavioural, interpersonal, and physical consequences of CSA have been observed in therapeutic and prevention programmes, as well as in clinical and longitudinal studies, and are widely reported through empirical research published in international journals such as *Child Abuse & Neglect*, first issued in 1977. However, empirical research conducted within Aboriginal communities in Canada indicates that psychological and physical health outcomes vary significantly depending on the historical and cultural backgrounds of survivors, though these are not the only influencing factors. Intergenerational trauma and sexual abuse, isolation, forced relocation and assimilation, cultural oppression, community fragmentation, the ongoing harms caused by the legacy of residential schools (including the intergenerational repetition of physical and sexual abuse), unemployment, domestic violence, and family disruption are among the key factors affecting Aboriginal adult female survivors of CSA (Daily 1987; Aboriginal Women's Council of Saskatchewan 1989; Hodgson 1990; McEvoy & Daniluk 1995; Vézina, Dion, & Trocmé 2009; Helmus & Kyne 2023).

Even though all children are vulnerable, some are more vulnerable than others. Hence, the term *children at risk*. Child vulnerability implies "those children who are more exposed to risks than their peers" (Arora et al 2015). Vulnerability can thus be considered "the channel for harm as risks can translate into harming the well-being of the child" (Kutsar et al 2024, 12). Child vulnerability scholars emphasise that vulnerability "can have internal and external sources," meaning that vulnerability can derive from both internal and external factors. Examples of vulnerability related to internal risks (also called *individual* vulnerability) are "lack of certain cognitive, physical and emotional abilities" and their respective symptomatology (13). The absence of these abilities may be the product of childhood trauma, which is the most extreme manifestation of child vulnerability.

In the case of child victims of CSA, trauma may exacerbate their vulnerability, as childhood trauma can lead to Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD). A history of traumatic victimisation and disrupted relationships with primary caregivers, cumulative exposure to sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, and bullying stand as

the primary causes deriving in DTD, which overlaps with the symptomatology of childhood posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) while simultaneously expanding it to also tackle symptoms of emotional/somatic, cognitive/behavioural, and self/relational dysregulation triggered by relational detachment (Spinazzola et al 2021). In the case of Indigenous CSA child victims, *ontological and environmental vulnerability* may overlap with *structural vulnerability*, which refers to structural processes and institutions, such as healthcare, justice and welfare systems, which further aggravate the child's susceptibility to harm and its physical, psychological, behavioural, and spiritual sequelae (Kutsar et al 2024).

Indigenous scholars, psychologists, and community workers addressing cases of CSA and disclosure have documented the embodied symptoms experienced by Indigenous child victims. These include venereal diseases, sore throats, choking or difficulty swallowing, menstruation difficulties, weight loss, experiencing the body as numb, traumatic amnesia, frequent masturbation, depression, night terrors, suicide attempts, refusing to eat, and high risk taking (Bopp & Bopp 1997, 16-17). This symptomatology, which may persist and aggravate in adulthood, is vividly reflected in Mailhot's memoir, ranging from dissociative amnesia, nightmares, and self-starvation to emotional numbness, dysphoria, and a sense of dirt.

As the memoir unfolds, Mailhot recalls sitting on his father's lap while he painted during her early childhood. The memory is sensory-rich: she can still smell his watercolours and body odour. Yet, it is also disjointed and unsettling. Subtle sexual undertones emerge as she recounts how her father held her "tight" for hours in their old basement, though the recollection is too jumbled and dissociative (Mailhot 2019, 27). Following her grandmother's death, Mailhot became physically ill with tuberculosis and experienced a profound psychological collapse, losing the ability to sleep, speak, eat, or dream. "That's when my nightmares came. A spinning wheel, a white porcelain tooth, a snarling mouth, and lighting haunted me" (Mailhot 2019, 4). While traditional healers were summoned by her mother, no clear cause for her suffering could be identified: "It became harder to stomach myself, and harder to eat" (Mailhot 2019, 5).

Mailhot describes her childhood self as "awful" and "mindless," describing a state of exhaustion, hunger, and self-alienation: "what potential there was in being awful. My mindlessness became a gift" (2019, 5). This internalisation of blame and degradation resonates with clinical research on CSA, which shows that children frequently perceive themselves as inherently 'bad' or deserving of harm as a coping mechanism (Bopp & Bopp 1997). As Mitchell and Black (1994) suggest, the child subjected to sexual abuse may conclude: "'Since I am inextricably awful, awful things are happening to me.'" Aaron (2012) similarly argues that abused children often rationalise their victimisation through self-blame. These early cognitive distortions are frequently accompanied by symptoms such as anger, helplessness, depression, and mistrustfulness, all of which find expression in Mailhot's haunting recollections (Bopp & Bopp 1997).

Conversely, as Mailhot explicitly reveals, mindlessness, or a state of emotional detachment and physical numbness, functions as a survival mechanism in the context of severe sexual abuse. She writes, "in the shower, before I knew how to

be scared or protect myself, I disappeared. Ten minutes of my life were enough to kill me" (Mailhot 2019, 114). In such cases, dissociative amnesia can emerge as a psychological defense, that is, an adaptive response that protects the individual from experiencing pain too overwhelming to process consciously. Dian Million (2013) underscores this by stating, "trauma supposes a violence that overwhelms, wounding individual (and collective) psyche, sometimes suspending access to memory" (2). Similarly, Jennifer J. Freyd's betrayal trauma theory (1994) posits that when a trusted figure, such as a parent or caregiver, violates fundamental relational ethics, the victim may remain unaware of the trauma not merely to alleviate suffering but, crucially, to ensure survival (307). Dissociation, therefore, is not simply a symptom but a means of psychological endurance in the face of extreme abuse. This is particularly significant when the perpetrator is an attachment figure, as the child must preserve some sense of relational continuity in order to navigate daily existence. Thus, the psychological toll of such abuse, especially when committed by a trusted adult, can be too distressing for a child's mind to fully register, thereby necessitating unconscious erasure or distortion of the event. In Mailhot's narrative, this dissociative mechanism becomes both a site of trauma and a strategy of survival, thus illustrating the profound psychological complexity of CSA.

In this way, dissociative amnesia also refers to the loss of "autobiographical memory" (psychogenic or functional memory) due to "dissociative or repressive coping" (Mangiulli et al 2022, 191). Dissociative amnesia has been said to occur in the context of "fugue states," a condition in which "memory and sense of identity are compromised," usually accompanying severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Mangiulli et al 2022). The repression or blockage of traumatic memories often functions as a necessary adaptive mechanism, enabling the child to continue developing and to maintain attachment to primary caregivers, even when those caregivers are the source of harm. As Mailhot (2019) poignantly writes, "I made a life out of naming things, and I couldn't speak this" (110). This inability to articulate traumatic experience underscores the profound connection between memory, trauma, and language. She further observes, "the rest of the year was a practice of language. Every new word became more horrific," suggesting that linguistic development itself became a site of pain and confrontation (Mailhot 2019, 114). In this context, Mailhot's silence or inability to create a verbal account of her past trauma is not a void, but a form of embodied knowledge. Her impossibility to "speak this," as she writes, reflects not absence, but a neurological and psychological mechanism of survival.

Trauma resulting from sexual abuse can disrupt the normal integration of memory, leading to a transformation of verbal or declarative knowledge into non-declarative or procedural forms. Such memories may not be accessible through linguistic recall, yet they remain functionally encoded in the body and behaviour. Verbal recall, in this context, refers to the capacity to consciously articulate traumatic experience through language. However, as Moore (2022) notes, children who have experienced sexual abuse may be unable to produce a coherent linguistic account of their trauma, instead re-enacting early, unconscious experiences through behaviour, play, or other non-verbal modes of expression. This dynamic is illustrated in Mailhot's recollection of a childhood drawing. As a child, she sketched in her journal a naked

male figure with exaggerated limbs, positioned beside a small, fearful child. The man's body is rendered with care and precision, suggesting a deliberate act of representation. "The girl next to the man appeared small," Mailhot writes, "and her smile was not a real smile, but a sign" (2019, 109). This moment exemplifies how trauma may emerge not through narrative, but through symbolic and visual expression. When her mother discovered the drawing, Mailhot deflected responsibility, blaming a friend named Michelle. Her mother accepted the lie without hesitation and simply prohibited further contact with the girl. "My mother explained to me that men hurt children. They're capable," Mailhot (2019) recalls, yet the conversation ended there. "She believed my lie easily, without question. Not one" (109). The failure to pursue the implication of the drawing becomes a moment of poignant absence. "Haunting," Mailhot (2019) later recalls, "what a mother does not see" (103).

Child psychotherapist Mary Sue Moore argues that "traumatic experiences – whether related to illness, abuse, or other events– can be held in declarative memory, and these memories can be recalled and verbalised as well as represented in drawings" (2022, 117). A child's drawing process, and his or her drawing itself, may reflect "specific non-declarative, procedural memories of early childhood trauma" (Moore 2022, 117). Dissociated from conscious thought and thus unable to be linguistically articulated, these memories may emerge in symbolic drawings, such as Mailhot's. In such disclosure cases, immediate and sensitive intervention is crucial. When symbolic communication of trauma is overlooked or dismissed, the child's psychological distress may be exacerbated. As Mailhot observes, the smile on the girl's face was not a real smile, but a subtle signal of extreme distress, a cry for help and maternal protection.

At the time of Mailhot's "accidental disclosure," her household remained deeply ruptured, both structurally and emotionally, echoing what Sorenson and Snow (1991) identify as the initial phase of trauma disclosure, which occurs within a destabilised environment. As she recounts, not only was her father still living at home and sexually assaulting both her and her siblings, but her mother, herself a survivor of marital rape and domestic violence, was largely absent. Mailhot (2019) describes her childhood home as a desolate and haunted space, saturated with spectral presences and psychic residue: "there is no way to strip them from my body," she writes (103). As an adult, during a therapeutic session, Mailhot is asked to describe a safe space. Her response, "my safe space is outside my childhood home," underscores how the very site that should have provided protection was the locus of persistent violation (2019, 111). She adds, "I felt like a pendulum, or something open, steady and drawing to a time. Ready to greet some horrible memory beneath the safety of my space" (2019, 111). Here, her language reveals a dissociative structure of memory: a simultaneous readiness to confront the past and an urgent need to remain alienated. She recollects her mother's body lying out against the concrete floor of their home, with her father standing over her, an image that reactivates the sensory trauma of the scene: she vividly recalls the smell of his body and the obscenity of his pubic mound. Mailhot's retrieval of memory is not linear or confined to the personal. Instead, it is catalysed through the remembering and retelling of her mother's gruesome history of domestic and sexual violence: "You were folklore and rumor, and there is a myth a man took, like the apple, but of your person," she writes, weaving mythic

resonance into a chant-like invocation of matrilineal suffering (Mailhot 2019, 122). This narrative strategy foregrounds what could be termed a *genealogy of vulnerability*, a matrix where individual trauma, maternal history, and collective female grief are intertwined. Through this recursive structure, Mailhot's memoir charts not only the biographical continuity of suffering, but its cultural transmission: the way trauma circulates across generations, coded into female bodies, beyond blood ties, becoming embedded in memory, language, and silence.

In this manner, Jeremy Braithwaite (2018) introduces the concept of "colonised silence" in order to describe how settler colonialism has fostered a culture of silence surrounding CSA within Indigenous communities. He argues that "if silence was not a traditional response to trauma and adversity, explanations for the under-reporting and non-disclosure of crimes of sexual violence today must not be divorced from the broader historical context from which these crimes have evolved –namely, colonialism" (Braithwaite 2018, 590). Victims of CSA in Aboriginal communities face significant barriers to disclosure, revealing that this is a deeply rooted issue among ethnic minorities. Among these barriers, non-supportive responses from non-offending mothers appear to be among the most impactful. Additionally, fear of social, cultural, political, and economic stigmatisation, discrimination, and marginalisation presents a further obstacle. Research also shows that Indigenous female victims of CSA often fear that disclosure will lead to their communities being blamed, that authorities will frame the abuse as a cultural deficit, and that the broader systemic context will be ignored (McEvoy & Daniluk 1995). Many also worry that their abuser, frequently a father figure, will be incarcerated, resulting in a loss of household income, the involvement of child welfare authorities, and potentially, the removal of children from the home (Braithwaite 2018). In her memoir, Mailhot poignantly recounts how, as a child, she would wait for hours to be fed by her father, often eating only once a day after he returned home from the bar, smelling of alcohol. Such economic dependence on the perpetrator thus emerges as a profound barrier to disclosure.

However, even when victims choose to speak out, a multitude of structural and institutional failures continue to obstruct justice. These include deficient federal policies and practices, discriminatory treatment of families, use of racist and sexist stereotypes by Canadian courts, restrictions on tribal courts' authority and ability to punish serious crimes, impediments to prosecution, inadequate financial resources and investment support, lack of culturally specific medical and psychological support, discrimination and language barriers, to name just a few causes (Amnesty International 2007; Owens 2012; Papalia 2015). These failures have resulted in the widespread neglect of sexually abused women and children across hundreds of Native American and Alaska Native communities.

Revisiting the concept of embodied vulnerability, a powerful instance of the *genealogy of vulnerability* portrayed in Mailhot's piece appears in her depiction of bodily movement as both constrained and defined by collective female trauma: "I feel like my body is being drawn through a syringe. Sometimes walking is hard. The gravity of Indian women's situations, and the weight of our bodies, are too much" (Mailhot 2019, 30). Mailhot posits at the corporeal level Indigenous women's

history and present reality: pain and illness inscribed on their bodies as maps of wounded subjectivity and embodied violence. On the other hand, her metaphor of the "syringe" simultaneously invokes the social control exerted by Western medicine and biopolitics over Indigenous peoples, rendering them docile bodies in need of commodification and discipline. This bio colonial impulse is particularly evident in the medical treatment of Indigenous women and children, who have been historically cast as *terra nullius*, an empty, exploitable land subjected to sterilisation, overmedicalisation, and sexual violence. Notably, Mailhot touchingly describes how her biomedical treatment immerses her in a state of physical numbness and dysphoria, further alienating her from her body and intensifying her dissociative symptoms. She writes, "they gave me Ambien, and I walked the line, stopping at every barred window. I wanted to hear the world, but the glass was too thick" (Mailhot 2019, 24). Her inability to access the outside world, both physically and auditorily, serves as a powerful metaphor for her incapacity to recall the traumatic memories of sexual abuse. Moreover, this metaphor also reinforces how systemic and pharmacological interventions can further suppress the voices and memories of Indigenous survivors.

As previously stated, repressed traumatic memories often result in the absence or disruption of language encoding. When linguistic articulation is unavailable to child CSA survivors, self-expression may manifest instead through corporeal and sensorial channels. In such cases, unprocessed trauma is experienced not as narrative memory but as somatic and affective symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive images, sensory flooding, somatisation, and chronic physical illness (Bremner & Marmar 1998). Mailhot's memoir reflects this dynamic, detailing how bodily symptoms, such as gastrointestinal distress, nausea, purging, vomiting, and chronic sleep disturbances, are developed in response to trauma. These align with findings by Herman (2022), who notes that survivors frequently engage in self-injury or other forms of bodily harm as expressions of unresolved trauma (158-59). Eating disorders, particularly anorexia and bulimia nervosa, are also prevalent among female CSA survivors. These disorders often emerge in early adolescence and persist into adulthood, functioning both as coping mechanisms and as assertions of control. Mailhot articulates this vividly: "I don't eat for days so you can run your hands over my ribcage" (2019, 25). This form of self-starvation illustrates how survivors may attempt to reclaim agency over a body previously rendered powerless. Scholars such as Henke (2000) argue that this drive to maintain a thin, boyish figure may reflect a desire to render the body non-sexual, thereby avoiding reobjectification (129). Feminist therapists have further emphasised that these behaviours constitute acts of control in an otherwise unpredictable and unsafe world, efforts to reassert ownership over the body through self-regulation, whether through food restriction or self-inflicted pain (Connors & Wayne 1993; Smolak 2001).

While pregnant and already a mother, Mailhot engages in self-harm, cutting her wrists and leaving "small, thin, red lines" across them (2019, 92). Self-mutilation has long been theorised as an adaptive coping mechanism among CSA survivors, a method of negotiating the psychic helplessness and somatic residue of trauma. Young (1992) terms *embodiment* trauma which is "experienced in and through the body" (90), and when linguistic expression is foreclosed, the body often becomes

the primary site of articulation. In this context, Turell and Armsworth (2000) argue that self-injury may simultaneously function as a form of bodily punishment and as a means of counteracting dissociative tendencies, offering a momentary sense of grounding (245). Mailhot's memoir exemplifies this complex embodiment of trauma. She exhibits an obsessive relationship with her body, compulsively weighing herself and engaging in restrictive eating. Her assertion "the meal I order after being fucked, by you, or anyone, is something earned" highlights how her relationship to food is mediated by sexual submission and self-worth (Mailhot 2019, 25). Such dynamics echo patterns often established in early instances of CSA, where children may learn to exchange bodily compliance for basic needs, such as nourishment. In adulthood, this exchange often reconfigures into compulsive sexual behaviours rooted not in pleasure but in a compulsive need for male validation. As Henke (2000) observes, these scripts reenact "the trauma of paternal seduction", perpetuating a cycle wherein sex is divorced from intimacy and repurposed as a transactional, self-negating act (xx-xxi).

Indeed, problematic sexual behaviours are frequently observed among female survivors of CSA, manifesting across a continuum that includes sexual withdrawal, dysfunction, hypersexuality, and compulsive behaviour (Aaron 2012). Empirical research indicates that responses to CSA are highly variable and are shaped by a range of interrelated factors, including the age of the victim at the time of abuse, the specific nature and duration of the abuse, levels of emotional neglect, the degree of coercion or violence involved, and the relationship between the perpetrator and the child (Aaron 2012; Kendall-Tackett et al 1993). Scholars have emphasised that younger victims are particularly vulnerable to exhibiting sexualised external behaviours as a response to trauma. As early as five years old, Mailhot was coerced into masturbating her father and touching his genitalia. As the abuse would always take place in the shower, exposing oneself in an inappropriate sexual way, forcing someone to masturbate, oral sex, and sexually suggestive talk are other sexually abusive behaviours that could have occurred (Bopp & Bopp 1997).

Traumatic memories are often described as "wordless and static", manifesting instead as "vivid sensations and images" (Herman 2022, 140). In her memoir, Mailhot evokes such sensory imprints through the visceral recollection of her father's "shameful" fingers and his distinct body odour, suggestive of forced sexual contact and non-consensual fondling. Her memories are fragmented yet charged with emotional clarity: she recalls his pubic hair, the compulsion to cover her nostrils, and an intense sense of contamination, describing her hands as dirty and her eyes as "obscene in the light" (Mailhot 2019, 108). From the opening pages, Mailhot repeatedly refers to herself as "sick," "possessed," "dirty," and "squaw," signalling a persistent embodiment of shame and trauma that surfaces most acutely during sexual encounters, where she oscillates between dissociation and sexual dysfunction (2019, 15). Such experiences of somatisation, where traumatic memories are relived through the body, are common among survivors of CSA. Feelings of internal filth or pollution are especially prevalent in long-term psychological outcomes, as documented by McEvoy and Daniluk (1995), and may be linked to a child survivor's attempt to internalise the evilness of her perpetrator. According to psychiatrist Judith Herman,

"by developing a contaminated, stigmatized identity, the child victim takes the evil of the abuser into herself and thereby preserves her primary attachments to her parents" (2022, 153).

In her study of incest and its psychiatric treatment in rural Bolivia, Carolina Borda-Niño-Wildman (2018) sharply criticises the dehumanisation of female survivors of CSA. She observes that terms such as "schizophrenic," "mentally retarded," and "Qhencha," a Quechua term meaning 'filthy,' are used to label these women (Borda-Niño-Wildman 2018, 271). As Borda-Niño-Wildman writes, these victims "are deemed to embody an inhuman excess (whilst their human soul has left their bodies)" (2018, 272). The derogatory connotations of Qhencha echo the culturally loaded term squaw, both of which reduce victims of sexual violence to abject identities. In a related vein, Waste Studies scholar Susan Signe Morrison (2015) uses the term "sexual trash" to describe the societal treatment of women who have experienced sexual violence. According to Morrison, the symbolic alignment of the female body with waste facilitates its disposal through "ostracism, defamation, exclusion, and death" (11). Sexually abused women, therefore, become targets of societal condemnation, rendered as "sexual waste". As Morrison (2015) asserts, "what had been valuable and venerated as sacred transforms into mere waste" (43). These women are constructed within a framework of pathology and anomaly, reduced to passive, uncontended matter. Within this framework, the concept of social waste must be understood as an active force shaping *geographies of vulnerability*. The notion of "trash-bodies", that is, bodies subjected to marginalisation, dejection, and disposability, originates from Avital Ronell (2004) and underscores the historical and cultural specificity of this phenomenon. Women from ethnic minorities who survive sexual abuse are particularly vulnerable to this process of "wastification," often more readily coerced into these abject roles than their white counterparts.

Mailhot's declaration, "I am a rare carcass in the river, bloated with deficit" condenses the colonial myth of deficiency into a visceral image of bodily abjection (2019, 105). This grotesque self-figuration literalises how deficit discourses colonise Indigenous subjectivities, translating them into pathology and self-loathing. As Dian Million (2013) critiques, the pathologisation of Indigenous women within biomedical and juridical frameworks reframes colonial trauma as individual dysfunction, obscuring its systemic roots. Mailhot transforms this discourse into embodied metaphor: her body becomes a vessel for both inherited pain and imposed deficit. This articulation also resonates with Waste Studies, which theorises how certain lives are rendered disposable through processes of abjection and nonvalue. In Mailhot's line, the Indigenous female body appears as social refuse, discarded and dehumanised, adrift in the river. This image recalls the tragic realities of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), whose bodies are too often found in rivers and ditches, materialising settler colonial logics of disposability (Papalia 2015). The carcass metaphor gains further resonance later when Mailhot describes touching her mother's deceased body and feeling "the deficit" inscribed in her flesh (2019, 104). Here, deficit moves from figurative language into lived, tactile experience: a daughter's hand on a mother's body transmits the inheritance of colonial injury. This poignant moment situates pathology not as an abstract diagnosis but as an embodied

transmission across generations, underscoring Million's (2013) insight that deficit is not natural but imposed, circulating through bodies, generations, and memory.

As such, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002) argues that in both broader society and the global economy, "the body is generally viewed and treated as an object, albeit a highly fetishised one, and as a 'commodity' that can be bartered, sold or stolen in divisible and alienable parts" (6). While her analysis primarily addresses organ donation, reproductive medicine, transplant surgery, bioethics, and biotechnology, the commodification of the body is inextricably linked to various forms of sexual violence, including prostitution, human trafficking, forced sterilisation, and rape. Within these contexts, the female body becomes divisible, instrumentalised for different purposes. Scheper-Hughes (2002) refers to this phenomenon as "a politics of the belly", contributing to what she terms a form of "late modern cannibalism" (6). For Indigenous women, this process is further intensified by colonial and racialised discourses that centre on the penetrability, impenetrability, consumption, or preservation of their genitalia. In Algonquin and Mohawk languages, the term squaw originally referred to the vagina or female genitalia. However, European settlers appropriated and distorted the word, employing it pejoratively to denote Indigenous women in general or, more disturbingly, to refer to their anatomy in particular (Merskin 2010, 348). Through this linguistic violence, sexually abused Indigenous women are reduced to squaws, their bodies constructed as sites of disposal, cubicles for waste, emblematic of racialised sexual exploitation and abjection.

It is important, however, to contextualise these somatic sensations and manifestations within Indigenous epistemologies. As Berman puts it, Among the Navajo, as well as in many other Native American communities, somatic illness is often interpreted not as an individual pathology but as the manifestation of spiritual imbalance and disharmony because of having transgressed one of many taboos (qtd Friar Williams 1995, 70). Grief may be stored in the lungs, blood may transmit cultural and intergenerational physical pain, and trauma may be trans-positioned across generations of Indigenous peoples (Methot 2019). As Nehiyaw writer, editor, educator, and public speaker Suzanne Methot explains that, for Indigenous peoples, traumatic memory can act as "an interruption or disruption in the present that connects to the past" (23). This experience is often referred to as a "ghost" or a "haunting", a form of possession (Methot 2019, 23). In this light, Mailhot's descriptions of her childhood as inhabited by ghosts whose hands persist on her body resonate with Indigenous understandings of trauma as embodied, causing both individual and collective imbalance.

This dynamic is further explored by Maureen McEvoy and Judith Daniluk in their article "Wounds to the Soul: The Experiences of Aboriginal Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse" (1995). Drawing on interviews with Indigenous women, the authors identify several recurring themes: shame and guilt, acute vulnerability, internal fragmentation, feelings of pollution or contamination, cultural invalidation, the need to make sense of the abuse, and the eventual process of reintegration (1995, 225). According to these women, the trauma of abuse leaves them feeling intrinsically defective, unlovable, and profoundly polluted. Many report a pattern of engaging in sexual relationships only with men they perceive as equally "contaminated"

often due to histories of drug abuse, thereby increasing the risk of revictimisation (McEvoy & Daniluk 1995). In alignment with these testimonies, Mailhot mobilises the squaw trope for a dual purpose: to map the embodied experiences of surviving CSA, on the one hand, and to regain the power of representation historically denied to Indigenous women, on the other. Compelled to embody the intergenerational myth of deficiency imposed upon Indigenous women, Mailhot redirects attention to the pathologising tendencies of Western medical culture, thereby suggesting that spiritual harm cannot be remedied through biochemical means. Her moving reflection "my illness has carried me into white buildings, into the doctor's office and the therapist's –with nothing to say, other than I need my grandmother's eyes on me, smiling at my misguided heart" evokes not only her emotional dislocation, but also the profound sense of cultural alienation she experiences within Western medical settings (Mailhot 2019, 18). The contrast between sterile, neglectful institutional spaces and the comforting presence of her grandmother underscores a longing for Indigenous forms of care, relation, and understanding that purely biomedical interventions fail to provide.

Accordingly, during a brief interview with a doctor at the mental hospital, Mailhot is asked to rate her willingness to die and the severity of her depression on a scale from one to ten. When she responds with a seven, the doctor offers a faint smile and remarks, "seven's not a ten" (Mailhot 2019, 20). This exchange further illustrates how Mailhot's narrative is effectively silenced and marginalised through clinical language. Western medical discourse, with its narrow focus on the psychological aspects of illness, fails to engage with the emotional, physical, spiritual, and, most crucially, the cultural dimensions of her experience. This reductionist approach exacerbates the patient's sense of a fragmented self, thus deepening her anomie, suffering, and vulnerability.

Mailhot's entanglement in abusive relationships, her compulsive pursuit of male validation, and the pervasive aftermath of these encounters, characterised by self-loathing and regret, underscores a persistent erosion of self-worth. She recounts one such moment with striking vulnerability: "I remember I was wearing black lace and new stockings. I wasn't stable, but men don't usually care about that. I didn't perform. I found myself uncovered and vulnerable, in fabric so thin –I thought of everything I've belted against my flesh and unclasped again and again" (Mailhot 2019, 16). Her body becomes a cartography of sexual violence, a vulnerable landscape etched with psychic wounds that threaten the core of her personhood. This harm, the trauma of rape, is not merely episodic but enduring, what Dian Million (2013) describes as a violence that "interrupts and dissolves the ontological presence of person and community, their desire to be, to go on, to endure, [and] to have integrity" (37-38). Through Mailhot's memoir, we bear witness to a complex interweaving of personal trauma with the collective legacies of colonisation, gendered violence, and cultural dispossession.

Mailhot's language is saturated with imagery of corporeal deficiency, bodily distress, sexual yearning, and violent carnal conquest. Her narrative renders the body not only as a site of trauma but also as a space through which histories of violence are inscribed, transmitted, and relived. This corporeal narrative of great

textual vulnerability becomes a powerful tool for expressing the cumulative impact of personal and collective suffering. For Indigenous women, the symptomatology of CSA often intersects with the long-term psychological consequences of colonisation, as both forms of violence inflict profound disruptions to identity, agency, and belonging. As Sarah Deer (2015) incisively asserts, rape is not only a gendered crime but also a colonial tool intrinsically tied to genocide and territorial conquest. The psychological aftermath of such violence may manifest itself through feelings of great fear, shame, guilt, disempowerment, identity fragmentation, and displacement, which reflects the layered gendered violence endured by Indigenous women across generations (Deer 2015). Mailhot poignantly renders this multifaceted and compounded systemic oppression visible through the remapping of her wounded body, which becomes a site where individual and collective subjectivities converge. Her body, experienced as not entirely her own, emerges as a complex configuration of female symbioses: a space marked by inherited trauma, intergenerational memory, embodied sensations, and the enduring effects of gendered and colonial violence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Theories of revictimisation have established that female survivors of CSA face a two to three times greater risk of adult revictimisation compared to women without a history of CSA (Arata 2002). In the case of Indigenous CSA survivors, this risk may be even more pronounced, as Indigenous women are almost three times more likely to experience sexual and physical assault than their Caucasian counterparts. In 2007, Amnesty International published a report titled "Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA," followed by "The Never-Ending Maze" (2022), which brought to light the alarming prevalence of sexual violence against Native North American women. These reports laid the groundwork for a more thorough investigation into the causes and concomitant effects of violence in Indigenous women's lives. Although significant gaps remain in the available data, statistics from these reports indicate that Native American and Alaska Native women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in the general US population (2007, 1).

Forced sterilisation, female genital mutilation (FGM), obstetric violence (OV), and the use of noxious contraceptive methods such as Norplant and Depo-Provera, potentially causing infertility, without free and informed consent, are other forms of largely reported systemic violations of Indigenous women and children's bodies, and their sexual and reproductive freedoms (Hill & Castañeda 2022; Smith 2005). The bodies of Indigenous women and girls appear not only rapable but also disposable, biological receptacles for severe sexual violence (Smith 2005). As Winona LaDuke argues, Native women find themselves "in the role of prey, to a predator society, whether for sexual discrimination, exploitation, sterilization, absence of control over our own bodies, or being the subjects of repressive laws and legislation in which we have no voice" (2002, 213).

Furthermore, sexual violence against Aboriginal women often involves a higher level of physical violence and brutalisation during the assaults, thereby exacerbating the severity of subsequent psychological trauma. The elevated levels of brutality inflicted upon Native American and Alaska Native women appear to stem from an ongoing colonial endeavour to obliterate Indigenous women's bodily integrity and undermine their reproductive capacities (Hernández-Ávila 1993). As Leanne Simpson asserts, Indigenous bodies, particularly those of women, children, and 2SQ (Two-Spirit/queer) individuals, embody "reproduction, Indigenous governance, and political systems" (2017, 41). Consequently, "they reproduce and amplify Indigeneity, and so it is these bodies that must be eradicated—disappeared and erased into Canadian society, outright murdered, or damaged to the point where we can no longer reproduce Indigeneity" (Simpson 2017, 41). Genital injuries resulting from sexual violence are thus not uncommon, alongside stab wounds, fractures, and internal injuries (Bachman et al 2010).

This article has examined the complex intersections between CSA, Indigenous identity, trauma, and embodied vulnerability through the lens of Terese Marie Mailhot's memoir. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in psychology, Indigenous studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial trauma studies, the article has traced how CSA symptomatology, ranging from dissociative amnesia and self-harm to eating disorders and hypersexuality, is both psychologically rooted and culturally inflicted. The concept of *embodied vulnerability* emerges as central, revealing how trauma is inscribed not only on the psyche but also on the body, often eluding linguistic representation while finding expression through sensory, symbolic, and behavioural forms. In her theory on the power of Indigenous personal myth-making through autobiography, Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) argues that "converting the residual pain of traumatic events first into language and subsequently into text enables us to distance ourselves from the trauma" (70). Building on this framework, I contend that autobiography may also function as a powerful technique for memory retrieval in cases of CSA involving dissociative amnesia.

Mailhot's narrative offers a deeply affective and critical account of trauma's persistence, not merely as a personal affliction but as a manifestation of structural violence, specifically colonialism, systemic racism, gendered oppression, and intergenerational sexual abuse. The memoir illustrates how CSA trauma within Indigenous communities is both exacerbated and obscured by settler-colonial legacies that perpetuate silencing, medical reductionism and mistreatment, and juridical failure. Through Mailhot's recollections, the memoir resists these epistemic erasures by reclaiming narrative authority, rendering visible the psychic and bodily residues of abuse, (re)mapping Indigenous gendered geographies, and illuminating the spiritual and cultural dimensions of illness and matrilineal suffering.

Ultimately, this study puts forth the urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and historically grounded approaches to CSA intervention, especially for Indigenous survivors. Accordingly, Sarah Deer (2015) argues that what is needed is a victim-sensitive legal framework that incorporates Indigenous traditional belief systems and promotes both self-determination for tribal nations and bodily sovereignty for Indigenous women. Such a framework would represent

an effort to revitalise precolonial gender norms and to foster community awareness and accountability through culturally relevant approaches. Importantly, it should integrate an understanding of historical trauma (HT) into contemporary legal responses and be guided by an Indigenous theory of rape (Deer 2015, 110). Legal remedies must be developed independently and grounded in Indigenous women's perspectives, incorporating the testimonies of survivors of sexual assault into tribal legislation. In addition to contemporary accounts, traditional stories, such as *the tale of the Raped Maiden*, alongside ceremonies and spiritual teachings passed down by women, should be included to reframe the imagery and narratives associated with Native women survivors. The erosion of these cultural practices, as noted, "has meant a greater vulnerability to exploitation and victimization" (Deer 2015, 119). Restoring the presence of ceremonial and traditional healers within justice and healing processes is therefore essential to support survivors and restore communal balance. As such, Mailhot's text serves not only as a testimony of personal pain but also as a site of collective witnessing and relationality, where the genealogy of vulnerability is mapped across bodies and generations of Native women. In doing so, her work challenges dominant paradigms of disclosure and recovery as homogeneous phenomena, and reorients the discourse toward Indigenous ways of knowing, healing, and remembering.

Reviews sent to the authors: 4/03/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 14/05/2026

WORKS CITED

Aaron, Michael. 2012. "The Pathways of Problematic Sexual Behavior: A Literature Review of Factors Affecting Adult Sexual Behavior in Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse." *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 19(3): 199-218.

Aboriginal Women's Council of Saskatchewan. 1989. "Child Sexual Abuse: Words from Concerned Women." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 10(2-3): 90-91.

Alexander, Pamela C., & Kristin T. Anderson. 1998. "Adult Attachment and Long-Term Effects in Survivors of Incest." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 22(1): 45-61.

Allen, Chadwick. 1999. "Blood (and) Memory." *American Literature* 71(1): 93-116.

Amnesty International. 2007. *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA.* Amnesty International. Accessed 27 July 2026. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR51/035/2007/en/.

Allen, Chadwick. 2022. *The Never-Ending Maze: Continued Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA.* Amnesty International. Accessed 27 July 2026. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/5484/2022/en/.

Arata, Catalina M. 2002. "Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Revictimization." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 9(2): 135-64.

Arora, A., Shah, M.K., Chaturvedi, R., & S. Gupta. 2015. "Child Vulnerability: Conceptual Issues." *Child Indicators Research* 8(2): 219-39.

Assink, Mark, Van Der Put, Claudia E., Meeuwsen, Mandy W.C.M., De Jong, Nynke M., Oort, Frans J., Stams, Geert Jan J.M., & Machteld Hoeve. 2019. "Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Victimization: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Psychological Bulletin* 145(5): 459-89.

Bachman, Ronet, Zaykowski, Heather, Lanier, Christina, Poteyeva, Margarita, & Rachel Kallmyer. 2010. "Estimating the Magnitude of Rape and Sexual Assault Against American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Women." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 43(2): 199-222.

Blackstock, Cindy, Trocmé, Nico, & Marlyn Bennett. 2004. "Child Maltreatment Investigations Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Families in Canada: A Comparative Analysis." *Violence Against Women* 10(8): 901-16.

Bopp, Judie, & Michael Bopp. 1997. *At the Time of Disclosure: Manual for Front-Line Community Workers Dealing with Sexual Abuse Disclosures in Aboriginal Communities.* Four Worlds International Institute.

Borda-Niño-Wildman, Carolina. 2018. *The Medicalisation of Incest and Abuse: Biomedical and Indigenous Perceptions in Rural Bolivia.* Routledge.

Braithwaite, Jeremy. 2018. "Colonized Silence: Child Sexual Abuse and the Canadian State." *Journal of Sociology* 54(4): 582-98.

Bremner, J. Douglas, & Charles R. Marmar. 1998. *Trauma, Memory, and Dissociation.* American Psychiatric Press.

Browne, Angela, & David Finkelhor. 1986. "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research." *Psychological Bulletin* 99(1): 66-77.

Chandler, Michael J., & Christopher E. Lalonde. 1998. "Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35(2): 191–219.

Clark, Natalie. 2016. "Transforming Violence: Word Warriors, Indigenous Youth, and Decolonizing Gender." *Girlhood Studies* 9(2): 1-15.

Cole, Alyson. 2016. "All of Us Are Vulnerable, but Some Are More Vulnerable Than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique." *Critical Horizons* 17(2): 260-77.

Cole, Pamela M., & Frank W. Putnam. 1992. "Effect of Incest on Self and Social Functioning: A Developmental Psychopathology Perspective." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 60(2): 174-84.

Collin-Vézina, Delphine, Dion, Jacinthe, & Nico Trocmé. 2009. "Sexual Abuse in Canada: Findings from the 2008 Canadian Incidence Study." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 33(11): 845-56.

Collin-Vézina, Delphine, Dion, Jacinthe, & Nico Trocmé. 2009. "Sexual Abuse in Canadian Aboriginal Communities: A Broad Review of Conflicting Evidence." *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 7(1): 27-47.

Connors, Mary E., & Kathryn F. Wayne. 1993. *Toward a New Understanding of Eating Disorders: Integrating the Psychological and Cultural Perspectives.* American Psychological Association.

Daily, B. 1987. "The Sexual Abuse of Native Children." In *Family Violence: A Native Perspective: Transcribed and Edited Proceedings of the 1987 Meeting of the Canadian Psychiatric Association Section on Native Mental Health*, ed. C.C. Brant & J. Ann Brant. 98-120. Canadian Psychiatric Association.

Deer, Sarah. 2015. *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America.* U of Minnesota P.

Duran, Bonnie, Duran, Eduardo, Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Maria, & Susan Yellow Horse-Davis. 1998. "Healing the American Indian Soul Wound." In *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma,* ed. Yael Danieli. 341–54. Plenum P.

Duran, Eduardo, & Bonnie Duran. 1995. *Native American Postcolonial Psychology.* State U of New York P.

Episkenew, Jo-Ann. 2009. *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing.* U of Manitoba P.

Evans-Campbell, Teresa. 2008. "Historical Trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities: A Multilevel Framework for Exploring Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23(3): 316-38.

Fernández-Santiago, Miriam, & Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández, eds. 2022. *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature.* Routledge.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2013. *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics.* Ashgate Publishing.

Finkelhor, David, & Angela Browne. 1985. "The Traumatic Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Conceptualization." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 55(4): 530-41.

Freire, Paulo. 2017. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Penguin Books.

Freyd, Jennifer J. 1994. "Betrayal Trauma: Traumatic Amnesia as an Adaptive Response to Childhood Abuse." *Ethics & Behavior* 4(4): 307-29.

Friar Williams, Elizabeth, ed. 1995. *Voices of Feminist Therapy.* Routledge.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel. 2015. *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction.* Routledge.

Gelinas, David J. 1983. "The Persisting Negative Effects of Incest." *Psychiatry* 46(4): 312-32.

Gold, Steven N., Lucenko, Barbara A., Elhai, Jon D., Swingle, Janine M., & Alfred H. Sellers. 1999. "A Comparison of Psychological/Psychiatric Symptomatology of Women and Men Sexually Abused as Children." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 23(7): 683-92.

Gold, Steven N., Lucenko, Barbara A., Elhai, Jon D., Swingle, Janine M., & Alfred H. Sellers. 1999. "Relationship Between Childhood Sexual Abuse Characteristics and Dissociation Among Women in Therapy." *Journal of Family Violence* 14(2): 157-71.

Goeman, Mishuana. 2013. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations.* U of Minnesota P.

Greenwood, M., de Leeuw, S., & N. M. Lindsay. 2018. *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health in Canada: Beyond the Social.* Canadian Scholars' P.

Helmus, L. Maaike, & Ashley Kyne. 2023. "Prevalence, Correlates, and Sequelae of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Among Indigenous Canadians: Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20(9): 5727.

Henke, Suzette A. 2000. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. Macmillan.

Herman, Judith Lewis. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.* Basic Books.

Hernández-Ávila, Inés. 1993. "In Praise of Insubordination, or What Makes a Good Woman Go Bad?" In *Transforming a Rape Culture,* ed. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, & Martha Roth. 375-92. Milkweed Editions.

Hill, Nicole, & Angela N. Castañeda. 2022. *Obstetric Violence: Realities and Resistance from Around the World.* Demeter Press.

Hodgson, Maggie. 1990. "Shattering the Silence: Working with Violence in Native Communities." In *Healing Voices: Feminist Approaches to Therapy with Women*, ed. Toni Ann Laidlaw & Cheryl Malmo. 33-44. Jossey-Bass.

Hogan, Linda. 2001. *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir.* W. W. Norton & Co.

Horejsi, Charles, Heavy Runner Craig, Bonnie, & Joe Pablo. 1992. "Reactions by Native American Parents to Child Protection Agencies: Cultural and Community Factors." *Child Welfare* 71(4): 329-42.

Human Rights Watch. 2013. *Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia, Canada.* Human Rights Watch.

Kendall-Tackett, Kathleen A., Meyer Williams, Linda, & David Finkelhor. 1993. "Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children: A Review and Synthesis of Recent Empirical Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 113(1): 164-80.

Kozhimannil, Katy B., Interrante, Julia D., Tofte, Alena N., & Lindsay K. Admon. 2020. "Severe Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Among Indigenous Women in the United States." *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 135(2): 294-300.

Kumar, Mohan B., & Michael Tjepkema. 2019. *Suicide Among First Nations People, Métis and Inuit (2011-2016): Findings from the 2011 Canadian Census Health and Environment Cohort (CanCHEC).* Catalogue no. 99-011-X2019001. Statistics Canada. Accessed 27 July 2026. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/99-011-x/99-011-x2019001-eng.htm.

Kutsar, Dagmar, Beilmann, Mai, & Oliver Nahkur. 2024. *Child Vulnerability and Vulnerable Subjectivity.* Springer.

Laduke, Winona. 2002. *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life.* South End Press.

Mailhot, Terese Marie. 2019. *Heart Berries: A Memoir.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Mangiulli, Ivan, Otgaar, Henry, Jelicic, Marko, & Harald Merckelbach. 2022. "A Critical Review of Case Studies on Dissociative Amnesia." *Clinical Psychological Science* 10(2): 191-211.

Mcevoy, Maureen, & Judith Daniluk. 1995. "Wounds to the Soul: The Experiences of Aboriginal Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse." *Canadian Journal of Counselling* 29(3): 213–30.

Merskin, Debra. 2010. "The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman." *Howard Journal of Communications* 21(4): 345–66.

Methot, Suzanne. 2019. *Legacy: Trauma, Story, and Indigenous Healing.* ECW Press.

Million, Dian. 2013. *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights.* U of Arizona P.

Mitchell, Stephen, & Margaret J. Black. 1994. *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought.* Basic Books.

Momaday, N. Scott. 1968. *House Made of Dawn.* Harper & Row.

Moore, Mary Sue. 2022. "How Can We Remember but Be Unable to Recall? The Complex Functions of Multi-Modular Memory." In *Trauma and Memory: The Science and the Silenced*, ed. Valerie Sinason & Ashley Conway. 111-24. Routledge.

Morrison, Signe Susan. 2015. *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Owens, Jasmine. n.d. "'Historic in a Bad Way': How the Tribal Law and Order Act Continues the American Tradition of Providing Inadequate Protection to American Indian and Alaska Native Rape Victims." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 102(2): 497-524.

Palacios, Janelle, & Teresa Portillo. 2009. "Understanding Native Women's Health: Historical Legacies." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 20(1): 15-27.

Papalia, Nahanni Fontaine. 2015. "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada: A National Tragedy." *Canadian Woman Studies* 30(1-2): 6-11.

Ronell, Avital. 2004. *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania.* U of Illinois P.

Ropp, Sarah. 2019. "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*." *MELUS* 44(2): 132-52.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2002. *Commodifying Bodies.* Sage.

Sharma, Malika. 2018. "'Can the Patient Speak?': Postcolonialism and Patient Involvement in Undergraduate and Postgraduate Medical Education." *Medical Education* 52(5): 471-79.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2015. *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence.* ARP Books.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance.* U of Minnesota P.

Smith, Andrea. 2003. "Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples." *Hypatia* 18(2): 70-85.

Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide.* South End Press.

Smolak, Linda. 2001. *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity in Youth.* American Psychological Association.

Spinazzola, Joseph, Van Der Kolk, Bessel, & Julian D. Ford. 2021. "Developmental Trauma Disorder: A Legacy of Attachment Trauma in Victimized Children." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 34(4): 711-20.

Thornton, Russell. 1987. *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492.* U of Oklahoma P.

Tolliday, Dale. 2020. "Child Sexual Abuse." In *Child Protection and the Care Continuum: Theoretical, Empirical and Practice Insights*, ed. Elizabeth Fernandez & Paul Delfabbro. 79-95. Routledge.

Turell, Susan C., & Mary W. Armsworth. 2000. "Differentiating Incest Survivors Who Self-Mutilate." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24(2): 237-49.

Vasilevska, Marija, Ross, Stephanie A., Gesink, Dionne, & David N. Fisman. 2012. "Relative Risk of Cervical Cancer in Indigenous Women in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Public Health Policy* 33(2): 148-64.

Voaklander, Britt, Rowe, Stewart, Sanni, Omolara, Campbell, Sandra, Eurich, Dean, & Maria B. Ospina. 2020. "Prevalence of Diabetes in Pregnancy Among Indigenous Women in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *The Lancet Global Health* 8(5): e681-e698.

Walsh, Kate, Fortier, Michelle A., & David Dilillo. 2010. "Adult Coping with Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Theoretical and Empirical Review." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 15(1): 1-13.

Weaver, Jace. 2001. *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture.* U of Oklahoma P.

Wolfe, Patrick. 1999. *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology.* Cassell.

World Health Organization. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health.* World Health Organization.

Young, Iris Marion. 1992. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory.* Indiana UP.

Younging, Gregory, & Jonathan Dewar. 2009. *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey.* Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

INTERVIEW

MIGRATION, MEMORY, IDENTITY: AN OVERVIEW AND INTERVIEW OF SHERRY THOMAS'S WRITING *

Jayashree Kamblé
LaGuardia Community College

Abstract

Sherry Thomas began publishing romance novels in 2008. Her initial works were set in Victorian England, a setting frequently seen in this sub-genre of romance fiction. Thomas branched out into Young Adult fantasy romance in 2013 and self-published a Young Adult novel in 2014, as well as an adult romance novel starring the same female protagonist, with Berkley. It included a bi-racial heroine, who shared some of Thomas's own Chinese heritage, and were partly set in late Ch'ing-era China (1883-91). She then launched the gender-flipped Lady Sherlock series with Berkley in 2016, which has a "slow-burn" romance plot but focuses on the mystery element, and published a contemporary mystery and a futuristic fantasy in 2025. This overview of her work, followed by an interview, documents her writing and publishing choices. After a round-up of her novels and novellas, the conversation records her experiences with publishing in a white-centering space and whether she has consciously negotiated with the dominant narratives it has cultivated. It is also a portrait of a Chinese American romance author whose knowledge of Chinese web novels and Chinese literature reoriented the genre's representation of love and history for readers like me, a non-white romance reader and scholar.

Keywords: Publishing, Romantasy, Asian American, Wuxia, Diversity, China, Sherlock Holmes.

MIGRACÓN, MEMORIA, IDENTIDAD:
UNA PANORÁMICA Y ENTREVISTA A SHERRY THOMAS

Resumen

Sherry Thomas comenzó a publicar novela romántica en 2008, inicialmente ambientada en la Inglaterra victoriana. En 2013, se adentra en la fantasía romántica juvenil con la autopublicación de una novela, así como una novela romántica para adultxs protagonizada por la misma heroína birracial que comparte su herencia china. En 2016 lanza *Lady Sherlock*, que incorpora *slow burn romance*, pero con misterio, y en 2025 una novela de misterio contemporánea y una fantasía futurista. Tras repasar su obra, la conversación aborda sus experiencias en un espacio literario marcado por la blanquitud y su relación con las narrativas dominantes del género. La entrevista perfila a la autora cuya familiaridad con las *web novels* chinas y la literatura china ha reorientado la representación del amor y de la historia dentro del género para lectoras asiática como yo.

Palabras claves: Industria editorial, romantasy, asiático-americano, Wuxia, diversidad, China, victoriano, Sherlock Holmes.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.11
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 221-239; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

1. OVERVIEW

Sherry Thomas is an award-winning author whose work ranges from romance fiction to historical mysteries, as well as Young Adult (YA) novels covering sub-genres like paranormal fantasy and wuxia martial arts sagas. An Asian American who came to the United States from mainland China as a teenager, she has a multi-racial family and lives in Austin, Texas. Her novels and novellas have gathered a significant following, garnered numerous accolades and awards, and made their way onto many best-of lists. Thomas began publishing romance novels in 2008 with Bantam, starting with the historical romance *Private Arrangements*, followed by *Delicious* (2008), *Not Quite a Husband* (2009), and *His at Night* (2010). These initial novels featured white British protagonists (both landed gentry and skilled working professionals). Three of the plots are set in Victorian England, a common choice in the historical romance sub-genre at the time, but *Not Quite a Husband* (*NQH*) unfolds in a less familiar space –the northwest region of the Indian sub-continent during the 1897 Siege of Malakand, an anti-colonial attack against a British garrison. Starting in 2012, Berkley brought out her subsequent historical romances, termed the Fitzhugh family series: *Beguiling the Beauty*, *Ravishing the Heiress*, and *Tempting the Bride*, plus two connected short stories, the last in 2014. Thomas also branched out into YA fantasy romance (the sub-genre recently dubbed "romantasy") in 2013 with the Elemental trilogy (from Harper Collins' Balzer+Bray teen imprint). The second book in the series was published in 2014 and the final one in 2015. Set in a magical feudal universe ruled by a fascist empire, it follows two teen mages destined to mount a revolution. *The Luckiest Lady in London* had also been published in 2013 and the Heart of Blade duology in 2014 comprising of a YA novel called *The Hidden Blade* (*THB*) and the same protagonist's adult romance (set a few years after the events of *THB*), titled *My Beautiful Enemy* (*MBE*). Two things distinguish this duology from previous work: Thomas self-published the YA title while Berkley published the adult romance novel in mass-market (as part of her final two-book contract for historical romance with them); second, the Heart of Blade stories was partly set in Ch'ing-era China and included a bi-racial heroine, who shares some of Thomas's own Chinese heritage.

My own interest in both Heart of Blade books goes back a decade. On Thomas's web site, she terms the initial idea for it as "my *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* meets *Forsyte Saga.*" The references are to the soulful flying-martial-arts movie by Ang Lee that introduced global audiences to the popular wuxia form –a Chinese popular fiction genre adapted for the screen by directors in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the twentieth century– and John Galsworthy's Victorian family drama. Alongside Thomas's familiar evocative prose, the narrative was also striking to me for being deeply rooted in a landscape that was nearer to the land of my birth, but which had till then been outside my literary and media imagination (both Asian and the one colored by Anglo-colonization). *MBE*'s flashback sections, set in 1883 on the Silk

* This interview was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

Road, radiated westward from Ch'ing/Qing-Empire Peking to the foothills of the Tian Shan and the western edges of the Xinjiang region into Chinese Turkestan's Tarim Basin, edging around the Takla Makan desert toward the cities of Kashgar and Yarkand. These sections are peppered with references to oases and towns that were nodes of a commercial and religious network that saw people of different ethnicities who traversed these stretches –Kazakh, Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Han, and Mongol, not to mention Europeans going through the mountain passes south to India. It mentioned a babel of languages used by these travelers and of a multiplicity of faiths that testified to the area's Muslim and Buddhist histories– a thriving socio-political diversity that contrasted sharply with what I knew of twentieth century state repressions and present-day genocides unfolding in those regions. While I had read English language romance novels set in China before this one (e.g. *China Bride* (2000) by Mary Jo Putney), *MBE* made these Central and Western Asian expanses come alive in a way that those works had not. In *MBE*, this unfamiliar backdrop felt integral to the protagonist's quest for identity rather than wallpaper for Western stories. But Thomas doubled down on the novel's geographic vastness, with the story's present day (1891) narrative beginning with a prolog on a ship to London from Asia, bringing the alien heroine –an idea I explored in my last book (2023)– to an England at once familiar to her through her English education in China, (and to the average historical romance reader), yet strange when seen through her eyes.

MBE also flips intermittently to the male character's point of view and the start of the love story in 1883 in Chinese Turkestan. Eventually, the 1891 plot takes the protagonists back to China, with an interlude in a cave of Buddhist scriptures carved in stone, alluding to historically valuable sites like the Mogao caves in Gangsu province. One of my current projects is to explore the way those cave sections conjure up a Buddhist past and its encounters with state repression in previous centuries in the same way that Thomas's novel itself is functioning in relation to recent Chinese history. My understanding of *MBE* in this regard has also profited from scholar Eric M. Selinger's (2022) analytical and pedagogical approaches to the *Heart of Blade* duology. Selinger analyzes the settings of the novels, and of Thomas's *NQH*, as well as the inter-racial romance in *My Beautiful Enemy* as representing a multi-ethnic and multi-religious world, and draws insightful connections between Thomas's references to Buddhist philosophy and romantic love.

All this is to say that the novel reconfigured for me the existing English-language romance fiction genre I had been reading since the 1980s (starting in my pre-teen years in India) and studying for almost two decades in the US. Thomas has been a gracious interlocutor while I have been on this journey as well. She has answered questions through social media and also been a respondent when I did a talk (AAARI 2023, minute 51:10) on my book chapter on romance heroines and citizenship (Kamblé 2023).[1]

[1] The chapter shows how *MBE*'s bi-racial traveler heroine foregrounds the question of women's precarious political identity and the insider/outsider status they occupy—a theme present in

Thomas's second self-published novel, which was also her first contemporary romance, *The One in My Heart*, appeared in 2015. I asked whether she queried this novel with a traditional publisher and she said she did not. She self-published it because at that time, publishers took on contemporary novels only if you committed to several and she did not have other contemporary romances planned. The story is set in present-day US (Connecticut/New York city) and has white protagonists. The novel is notable for an unusual twin narrative –the main male character's past love affair with a much older (now deceased) woman shadows the ostensible main romance plot. While Thomas plays with intertwining past and present events frequently, the presence of a previous love object is a distinctive element rarely seen in her other work.

After this novel, Thomas veered away from romance, venturing into the sub-genre of historical mysteries with women sleuths. Mainstays of these popular "lady detective" stories include writers like Tracy Grant, Anna Lee Huber, Tasha Alexander, Darcy Wilde, and Deanna Raybourn (as well as Jennifer Ashley, though her protagonist in the Below Stairs Mysteries is a cook, while Georgina Clarke's Lizzie Hardwicke is a sex-worker in the eponymous series). Instead of inventing a brand new Victorian investigator, Thomas pitched a gender-flipped Lady Sherlock/Charlotte Holmes series to Berkley, her romance publisher at the time and launched it with *A Study in Scarlet Women* in 2016; it has a "slow-burn" romance sub-plot but centers the mystery element. Her detective is a woman who has engineered a break from her minor-aristocrat family to escape a suitable marriage; now she lives in an independent household by pretending to be the sister-cum-assistant to a homebound (non-existent) problem-solver named Sherlock Holmes. Charlotte is assisted by an ensemble of characters that Holmes fans will recognize, though Watson is also gender-flipped (as are some others) and Thomas's Victorian world is more diverse in other ways as well, including in terms of sexual and bodily diversity, perhaps testifying to Thomas's familiarity with fan-fic (in which readers often redo their favorite works with such inclusion in mind). The Lady Sherlock series is now at eight books and counting; book nine is scheduled for fall 2026.

Thomas has continued to focus on the series in the last decade, except for a sci-fi/space fantasy novella, *The Heart is a Universe* (2017), and a Mulan re-telling, *The Magnolia Sword* (2019). The former was requested for the story collection *Sight Unseen* by Open Ink Press; the latter, a rewrite of the well-known folk tale/ballad but with a love plot, was published with Lee and Low, a multicultural publisher for children. The Mulan tale has been written/composed for centuries in China in a range of literary and staged forms, prose and verse. Disney's animated and live-action versions of *Mulan* (1998 and 2020, respectively) are only the latest to draw on that tale in English.

In 2025, Thomas shifted genre gears again, publishing *The Librarians*, a murder mystery set in present-day Austin, Texas, with Penguin Random House. While its A-plot revolves around two homicides, it has two characters whose joint story

all romance novels in direct or unsaid ways.

holds palimpsests of her classic romance novels –a second chance at love for a couple whose initial connection was electric but went unfulfilled. *The Librarians* also departs from Lady Sherlock's largely white cast of characters to return to Thomas's 2014/2019 foray into ethnically diverse representation, and uses dual-time narratives/flashbacks. Both protagonists (Hazel and Conrad) in the romance plot are transnational, globe-traveling, wealthy Asians– Hazel is the daughter of a wealthy Singaporean family that descends from the couple in *MBE*. She had separated from her husband, who then turned out to have committed art fraud and disappeared, leaving her to deal with a criminal investigation. At the start of the novel, she has moved to Austin to start a new job at a local library while taking care of an aging grandparent who is settled there. Part of her backstory is that as a young woman on an ocean cruise that had a stop in Madeira, she met a young biracial (Wasian) man and spent the day with him; then they went their own ways and she talked herself into discarding his phone number, an impulsive act she has regretted ever since. When she sees him again in Austin, the old attraction comes roaring back, but she wonders whether he is involved up in the murders that happened by the library branch.

Thomas shows them at two different ages and stages of their lives through the flashbacks and present-day sections of the novel. The latter section also becomes increasingly non-linear as the action progresses and the mystery's resolution approaches, with Thomas revealing events and information in selective chunks that disrupt chronological narrative. We also get part of Conrad's side of the story –that he had figured out the name of the mystery girl who had haunted him after Madeira and that he has been keeping tabs on her online ever since. We learn that he says he never dates Asians, a revelation that feels poignant after his yearning for this one specific Asian woman is revealed. The novel also includes a secondary romance plot –as *THB* did– between Hazel's library colleague and the man on whom he had a crush when they were both high schoolers. While this queer romance has a happy ending, there are two more romance plots that ended unhappily for two others in the ensemble cast. The murder mystery draws all of them in, and as the characters attempt to hide their own pasts, Thomas doles out events from both years ago and a few days and hours ago, disrupting our assumptions and foiling expectations. The shifts in time affect the romance plot as well, since that, too, unfolds through memories and present-day maneuverings by the lovers. Thomas thus mixes the structures of romance and mystery in a Rubik's cube of genre blending.

Even more interesting is a different side-effect of this structure: through the two protagonists' memories of their meeting in Madeira and their respective wealthy Asian (and Asian diaspora) families' behaviors and economic ups and downs, Thomas constructs a new type of Asian representation. She moves away from the older story template and type of the Asian working-class immigrant whose travel and trajectories are one-directional (East to West), whose roots are frozen in amber, and whose post-migration present is solely about first-generation immigrant labor and upward mobility, often in an anti-Asian environment. Instead, we see two people who are romantic leads in a way that is usually reserved for white protagonists in English-language romance novels –beautiful, financially secure, emotionally and sexually desirable and desiring, and politically fluid in terms of national and cultural

identities. It is an intriguing rewriting that redoes old patterns to center the traditional outsider to the West.

Thomas's other 2025 publication is the novella "Prima" in the collection *After the End*, which was steered by a group of authors and produced through a reader-supported million-dollar Kickstarter campaign. "Prima" is set in the waters of the Asia-Pacific in a world in which a fungus has changed both the geographies and workings of all societies. It opens with one protagonist declaring that they will forget the other as they sail away from each other, and subsequent sections switch points of view and time to narrate that decade-old meeting and present-day reunion. It is a classic instance of Thomas's core interest in memories and the impact of one's forced geographic movement on identity and the ability to love and receive love.

2. INTERVIEW

This interview is an edited compilation of an oral history of Thomas's journey as an author and of her writing and publishing choices. I conducted it in the context of a post-COVID-19-pandemic US and an entertainment print/digital industry that is grappling with a politically fractured landscape and the disruption caused in publishing by the crumbling of the Romance Writers of America, the end of the mass-market-sized historical romance line at Avon romance, and the flood of so-called AI tools.[2] The interview also charts Thomas's imaginative reach across fictionalized fraught cultural and political moments in history, which allude to or are influenced by, our present destabilized world.

The conversation delved into her experiences with publishing in a historically white-led and white-centering industry and explored whether she has consciously negotiated with the dominant narratives of love that it cultivated for decades. It is also a portrait of a Chinese American romance author whose familiarity with Chinese literature and media infuses her English-language story-telling and expanded the horizon of the genre's representation of love and history for me, a South Asian romance reader and researcher. It thus speaks to this special issue's inquiry into the genre's tactical potential for widening its cultural lens and decolonizing affective relationships. The interview was conducted over two long sessions online in the spring and fall of 2025 and has been edited to focus on the above ideas. While most of the answers are paraphrases, with occasional direct quotes, I also inserted short clarifying remarks in box brackets and longer explanations in footnotes.

[2] I use "post" only to suggest the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, not its end, since we continue to deal with its effects on individuals' health, safety, and well-being on a personal and political level.

2.1 Questions and Answers

[JK] What are your early memories of reading and writing or other media in China? Did you use multiple languages? I'm also interested in your memories of coming to the U.S. and of reading and writing or other media after that.

[ST] I read a lot when I was growing up in China. There were not a lot of books, but I read the ones we had at home and those my friends had. My family subscribed to many newspapers: four in Chinese as well as the *China Daily* [an English language newspaper]. I read *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Twenty Years Later*, the sequel to the *Three Musketeers* in Chinese. I first began learning English with my grandmother and then formally in middle school. When I came to the US, I had received one year of this training and was probably reading at 1st grade level in English, with maybe a vocabulary of about two hundred words.

I borrowed people's books (in Chinese) after coming to the US (and some were slightly "racy"). I soon ran out of those books though and had to resort to classical Chinese poetry before being forced to turn to books in English –*A Wrinkle in Time* was the first one. I remember the love that the characters had for each other in that one and that love saved them. I also read the last *Narnia* novel but did not understand what happened at the end till someone explained it to me later. Around the same time, I encountered romance novels in grocery stores and ones like Walmart/Kmart. I would skim them in the aisles and rejected some because I didn't understand words like "infamous" (which I thought meant "not famous") and "governess" (which I had hoped would be a woman governor).

I think the first romance novel I read was a Johanna Lindsey historical; the heroine's missing underpants is the only detail I recall.[3] I also recall a contemporary romance that I had heard of even in China, where the plot involved a woman being kidnapped in Mexico and then falling in love with the bandit; there is a scene in front of a fire or fireplace.[4] I then found a book about romances that mentioned Rosemary Rogers and I went looking for her novels. [I asked a follow-up about the violence in these novels and if she found them upsetting, as I had.] They were violent but I did not re-read those parts; I went back to the love scenes –I knew exactly where the first ones were– and the last scenes. I didn't like it when the stories were continued, especially if a relationship that had ended happily ran into trouble later. I could not believe in the couple if she kept breaking them up! But I liked Rogers because I thought she was Sri Lankan, unlike other authors, who were all white. I saw her as an outlier. My Sri Lankan acquaintances confirmed

[3] Based on some googling and crowd-sourcing, this could be a medieval romance, possibly *When Love Awaits* (1986) or *Defy Not the Heart* (1989), both from Avon romance.

[4] Another search and crowd-sourcing suggest that this novel might be Janet Dailey's *Touch the Wind* (1979).

that she was Sri Lankan, but I looked her up recently and Wikipedia says she was of Portuguese descent; since I had thought she was ethnic Sri Lankan and could write romance, I figured that I, someone Chinese, could, too.

I did not see myself as a minority or understand American assimilation though. I had no idea what it was to be considered a minority since I grew up as part of a super majority (Han) in China. I came to the US –my mother went to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge– with a strong sense of that identity and spent most of my early years here with Chinese graduate students. So, I didn't have the experience of being an American minority trying to, or being pressured to, assimilate. I did not understand the undercurrents of racism in the country or consider my personal experiences in that light. And I saw the US as a foreign place where I did not expect to be treated as a local –I expected to return to China. So, my experience was different from that of [an Asian American romance author who grew up in the US]. It was not till about age sixteen that the realization that the move was permanent sank in but there was still a possibility of moving back to China to work. But then I got married and it seemed clear that my husband would not be able to move there and work. I then stayed home and did not enter the workforce. [I followed up to ask if she meant that not having to work outside the home blunted the force of racism.] It was a key factor in not experiencing discrimination of all kinds [...] Both the family I grew up in and the family I married into value women and see me as a whole person and not a flattened version based on such things (ethnicity, sex, etc) that are determined at birth.

[JK] Did you study the humanities/literature in college?

[ST] We were an immigrant family so studying the humanities/literature would have been considered self-indulgent. And my grandmother was an English instructor, but my mother was a chemist, my dad was an engineer, and my grandfather taught at a medical college. So most everyone was in STEM and I did not mind STEM either. I was a biochemistry major briefly, but did not like biology and switched to business (an international trade and finance major in an economics department). I meant to study international relations/public policy in graduate school since I was multilingual and had the economics degree, which was attractive to those programs. I was accepted to Harvard's Kennedy school but only offered partial aid, and was considering some other schools, like Georgetown/Johns Hopkins. I deferred the start of the graduate program for marriage and pregnancy but then decided against that path. If I hadn't, maybe I would never have become a writer. To be clear, I didn't have a huge commitment to international relations; an embassy career just felt glamorous.

[JK] Why did you choose to write romance? How did that begin? Did you pick a pseudonym?

[ST] I read a lot of science fiction, most of Asimov, *Dune* (1965), *Childhood's End* (1953), *Lost Horizon* (1933) and romance. My memories of romance novels are of the covers of historical romances being very sexy. I only started thinking

about writing one when I was older and home with a young baby. I likely had undiagnosed Post-Partum Depression. I was doing extreme baking and I was the farthest thing from a trad wife. I was reading a romance by a *New York Times* bestselling author while the baby was napping and "disagreed violently" with it. I got mad that this book wasted the little free time I had. I told my husband at the end of the day –I'm going to write while I'm at home. I had an economics undergrad degree at that time and trying to make a go of writing seemed no worse a financial prospect than being a bank teller, which is what that degree would have let me do.

So that's when I started writing what would eventually become the novel *Private Arrangements*. I had about 90,000 words done when I read *How To Write a Romance and Get it Published*, which said not to join a writers' group till the manuscript was complete and to aim for 120,000 words for a historical. Turns out the book was 10 years old and that word count advice was no longer accurate, but that was what I read in it.[5] I joined a local Romance Writers of America chapter after my manuscript was ready –I had lengthened the 90,000 word one I had to 140,000 by adding a plot twist.

As for the pseudonym, Thomas is my husband's name –he is from India– and I had told him I'd use that if I got published.

I also wanted to write futuristic romance, because I read sci-fi and thought it would be fun to do romance in space. But since there was a lot of historical romance around then, I thought I could get started in publishing with that and then do futuristic ones. I was naïve and did not understand that if you started in one sub-genre, you had to do that at least for a while.

[JK] Who was your agent and which publisher did you begin with? How have those ties grown/changed?

[ST] I started querying agents and one, Sue Yuen, told me that *Private Arrangements* was too long so I stripped it back down to 90,000. That manuscript was followed by the one for *Luckiest Lady in London*. Neither was successful and she dropped me after the second one but she gave me good advice, such as "your stories open at the wrong place. You are writing in chronological order but they need to start after the couple meet again."[6]

I started shopping for another agent and found Kristin Nelson through advice on Miss Snark's blog. [This blog does not appear to be active but there is a website and the page with Kristin Nelson's profile is available (Authoress 2009).] I approached Kristin because she did not require a synopsis –I sent

[5] This book was probably Kathryn Falk's 1990 romance novel writing advice manual.

[6] It seems to me that this advice plus Thomas's dislike of Rogers's tendency to write multiple books for the same couple and breaking them apart after they had reached the genre's requisite happy ending is what has resulted in the core structure of Thomas's romance plots: a second chance at love that incorporates a breakup in the same novel but as painful flashbacks. Her romances end with the couple's happy future assured.

her the manuscript to *Private Arrangements* and she got back to me quickly and the book sold soon after.

[JK] Did you consciously decide to write white characters because the market was for historical romance novels and there were white people in them? And did your agents/editors ask you why you were writing white characters?

[ST] Agents and editors didn't ask me why I was writing white characters. I was not aware that I could write non-white characters till I encountered Courtney Milan and Jeannie Lin. As someone who was neither Black nor white, but who had mostly read white authors, and Rosemary Rogers was my example... Historical romance was so white that more of it did not really matter. And again, this is where not actually being born Chinese American comes in. Because I wasn't looking to find myself in this literature. It was entertainment. Because I was not only fluent but also literate in Chinese and grew up reading books all about Chinese people. So I didn't lack this. I didn't feel like I needed to see myself in this.

And also, as a person, I'm just not very interested in putting my own experience in my books. Books have always been an escape. I don't want to see myself in there. If I saw myself in there, it would not work as escape. I wanted to see myself represented as a woman. And I didn't even think of historical romance as white. I just thought historical romance is English aristocracy. The term "white" did not even cross my mind. My complaint at the time was not that it was white but that it just became so geographically constricted. Because when Rosemary Rogers was writing her romances, lots of them were taking place in America, in Europe –in France during the Napoleonic War, not England– in Mexico during the Revolution. She had a book that started in Sri Lanka.

[JK] Is that how *MBE* came about? Was it part of addressing that complaint? It has a biracial protagonist and large sections of the plot are in Asia. And does it echo your identity in any way?

[ST] *MBE* was not specifically addressing that. I first wrote the story of *MBE* not as a romance but as a "big book," a historical novel with a martial arts element. I queried it and everyone loved the query letter but no one wanted to see the manuscript. So I did not know what to do with it, till I had finished the Fitzhugh trilogy and I was thinking of leaving historical romance entirely because I had run out of ideas. But my agent suggested I try to do one more contract; I had the draft of *Luckiest Lady* so I sent that and Berkley offered to take it and one more historical romance. Once I completed *Luckiest Lady*, I thought about what I could submit as that second historical romance without having to start from scratch and *MBE* was the only thing that was left.

But it was in the vein of a lot of martial art epics that I read growing up. These novels were often a coming-of-age story starting with the childhood of the protagonist, such as the fiction of Louis Cha. [Cha was a best-selling author and his works have been adapted for the screen.]

Accordingly, the events of what would later be the duology of *THB* and *MBE* were all together in the first draft as interwoven/dual timelines. My

critique partner had given me a lot of feedback on it in the past, too, and I had just put it aside because it had felt overwhelming.

Now I separated the two parts of that big book and sent Berkley the adult romance of Ying-ying and Leighton. Then I beefed up the remaining YA story, which was initially just about Ying-ying, by adding the sections on Leighton's youth and made it novel length. And I also did this because I did not know if the market would support it. I think there was a time in the past five years when this book, if it had come out more recently, would have done a lot better. But at that time in 2013, the market would not support it. It has always been my worst selling title. And the reason that I also did *MBE* as my last [historical romance] was because I did not have to worry about how the sales would reflect on my future books anymore. So I thought, "Let's blow this taco stand." But it has always been a great personal favorite.

[JK] And mine. I had seen movies like *Crouching Tiger* and imagined the action in *MBE* happening in the places I had seen in them. I romanticized the spaces in it. And *MBE* expanded, for me at least, the historical romance genre in a way that had not been done in a long time. It was such a constrained geography. But I wondered if you have ever visited any of them.

[ST] No! And the thing is, I also read them as romanticized spaces, because in those Chinese martial art epics, they mention the Heavenly mountains and places like that, and just the name –Heavenly mountains! You can't help but be carried away by it, and it is one of the most beautiful places in the world. But no, I've never been there. But the Great Game– I never romanticized what life was like in those places.[7] They were territories being fought over.

[JK] I understand. I did read it in that way as well. The feuding, the conflict between the existing and dying Empire and all the regional governors that were out there; it was just fascinating to get access to that. So much of historical romance had become kind of anemic. It wasn't doing anything new or interesting. It had drained itself of any historical content at that point. It was just repeating the same old stuff. So I definitely enjoyed that part. As a follow up—why did you self-publish *THB* while Berkley published *MBE*?

[ST] I did not have a contract for *THB* and I could not contract it to someone else since it was not a stand-alone –it was meant to be the lead-up to *MBE*. So it seemed best to self-publish it. A lot of people were also self-publishing at the time.

[JK] What made Wendy McCurdy, at Berkley Penguin, take on *MBE* when she did? Did she have any concerns about *MBE*'s biracial protagonist? How did the novel do in terms of sales?

[ST] Ying-ying was always what she was. Wendy did not express any reservations about the biracial heroine. She is bi-racial herself. Publishers were losing

[7] The Great Game refers to espionage operations run by Western and other powers trying to make inroads into China and South Asia].

romance authors to indie publishing and really wanted to keep the ones they had. Berkley liked my traditional historical romance, *Luckiest Lady*, and perhaps that made Wendy take on *MBE* as well. It has always been my lowest seller though.

[JK] Hopefully, there's some kind of revival at some point. But it's good to know that the editor didn't have any questions or concerns. So maybe at least that indicates that we were in a different timeframe, because I'm also doing a history of BIPOC romance, and a lot of those authors from the early 1980s were told by editors to make their characters white. So that's helpful to know that at least, maybe some of that didn't happen in your case.

[ST] No, it did not. I did not get push back. But Berkley did not distribute *MBE* through Walmart –as it did *Luckiest Lady*– and I don't know if it was the premise. But you know, I had had to leave Bantam because, out of my first four historical romances, *NQH*, even with white protagonists and publishing support, had poor sales and cost the later books Walmart distribution. *NQH*'s low sales suggested that books set elsewhere, even if they were about white people –never mind other people *and* set elsewhere – would not do well at Walmart.

So I left Bantam and Berkley signed me. It wasn't a lot of money but they said they would get me back to mass merchandisers –which they did with *Luckiest Lady*, but we lost it with *MBE*. They said it was because of some kind of shakeup at Anderson distribution, which was the company that does all the actual distribution to mass merchandisers; but I'm not sure whether that's an excuse, and they just didn't want to carry it, because it was not a book that would sell greatly at Walmart (going by *NQH*, for example.)

Before I left Bantam, they did offer to reintroduce me as a debut author under a different name and get Walmart/mass merchandizing. I decided not to, because abandoning a pen name after just four books felt premature.

[JK] So they didn't directly say this to you, but it sounds like some of the books that have a biracial component or were outside of the UK setting...

[ST] Oh yeah, that was one of the reasons. And you can fault editors for asking writers to make changes, but editors pay attention to the market. And if the market is not buying, and authors want to make some money making a living doing this? They can either take a risk self-publishing or they can do what is more likely to get them a wider audience. This is what Jane of *Dear Author* [a romance blog] said a long time ago; she said she was hoping to see more diverse books with self-publishing, but that ended up not being the case. Because without traditional publishing as gatekeeping, there's still the audience gatekeeping. There's still the readership, general readership.

[JK] Yes, for sure. And as I'm writing the history of some of the early work of BIPOC romance, I'm being careful not to put the blame on editors. I'm more interested in figuring out, how do people maneuver within that structure? To what extent do they put in things that they really want, without completely dropping out of the game, because you're not really accomplishing anything, financially or otherwise, if you just refuse to engage. That's partly why *MBE*

is fascinating to me, because I think it does so many interesting things, but it's useful to know what some of that context is, and the fact that Bantam wanted you to use a different name in that offer they made you. And since you mentioned *NQH* again: that came out in 2009, years before *MBE*, and was also set in Asia. What prompted this plot and setting?

[ST] I had watched *The Painted Veil* (2006), with Edward Norton and Naomi Watts.[8] It felt like a movie someone could make of a Laura Kinsale novel but then it ended tragically, which I did not know about when I went to see the movie. I was shell-shocked. I wanted to re-write the story. But I did not want to set it in China so I looked into the history of other colonized countries and learned about the Battle/Siege of Malakand in 1897. So *NHQ* came about because I watched this movie and could not leave that tragic ending alone. You know, I always laugh when people say my books are gut-wrenching but I write fairy tales. I'm giving you a happy ending. It's not gut-wrenching for nothing!

[JK] Does your heritage as Asian American (and as someone who has a multi-cultural/ethnic family) play a role even when writing non-Asian/American characters/stories? Or when writing Asians?

[ST] Yes. Even before I came to the US, my life in China involved difference. My family was from the south but we lived in the north. My grandparents spoke Mandarin and it was intimidating to my friends who spoke the local dialect (though not because my grandparents spoke Mandarin but because their Mandarin was so heavily accented). I also have an early memory of being laughed at for not knowing how yeasted/fermented breads were made. (The staple food in my home was rice.) So I was always an outsider from the beginning and that "outsiderness" is a theme in my work. Being an immigrant [to another country] heightens that experience, such as in terms of accent, culture, behaviors, etc. The religiosity and racism in the US was most striking to me, as was encountering ideas like creationism. In China, atheism is enforced by the authorities, which is also warped, but the cultural divide within the US feels more vast. The US's cultural isolation from the rest of the world also felt striking when I first came here.

This awareness is present in my work. Lady Sherlock has some outsiders, people who do not fully belong to the mainstream. Ingram is half-Jewish, Charlotte and her sister are on the neuro- divergence spectrum, Mrs. Watson is pan sexual. In a sense, I'm always looking for diverse characters in the cast. *The Librarians* has much more diversity compared to the Victorian UK! Both main protagonists of the romance plot have Asian ancestry and are

[8] *The Painted Veil* is based on Somerset Maugham's novel of the same name. A British doctor posted in Hong Kong—Shanghai in the movie adaptation—weds a British socialite but the marriage soon seems like a mistake when she has an affair. Then he takes her with him to a remote region in the interior to tackle a cholera epidemic; the high-stakes situation draws them closer. Unlike a romance novel, the story ends tragically.

wealthy, trilingual, well-traveled. [I interjected here to ask if *Crazy, Rich Asians* (2013) was an inspiration.] No, I haven't read it. But I wanted to write broader Asian representation. There are a lot of good-looking Asians who are not as visible in this media landscape. This limited representation is possibly because prior migrants were not from elite classes.

But since I do not want characters to be very close to my own experience, Hazel is Singaporean, and along with her love interest, part of the Asian diaspora. Also, in the initial planning stages, I had thought to make one character wealthy, just in case the book might be the first in a series about this library staffer and librarians are under paid; it was decided that it would be a stand-alone, however, which was why I wrapped up all the threads by the end.

The main protagonists in "Prima" are part of an Asia-Pacific flotilla on this alternate Earth. Some of their family backstories, especially of the main male character, draw on the "palace intrigue" web novel sub-genre.[9] The cultural differences between the two main characters' countries in "Prima" [one is more progressive regarding gender roles] shows two aspects of some Eastern cultures. Women in the Tang dynasty (Seventh-Ninth century CE) had the most freedom (such as in apparel) and some of those elements are in this novella; as dynasties in China became weaker, however, there were more restrictions on women, which is the case with the man's family and country. I was also thinking about Afghanistan and the situation of women there as I was writing about the women characters.[10]

Ying-ying [in THB and MBE], if I think about it, is the product of two cultures and various conflicting but equally important influences, and she is –and I have heard people like me also referred to as– a third-culture kid; we grew up somewhere and then we grew up somewhere else. That is most like the outsider experience, of the outsider who is looking for a place. All my protagonists are outsiders in some way but she is the most obvious outsider in that sense.

[JK] That reminds me of another *MBE* question: Is the cave that houses the sculptures in the final section of the plot similarly based on specific eras in Chinese history? Where did the idea for the Buddhist sutras and the attacks on Buddhist monks come from? Are you alluding to Mongol incursions?[11]

---

[9] These are usually long online stories that readers can access on dedicated sites; some are free, some are part of subscription-based platforms. They take place in court/aristocratic settings and the plots have Asian protagonists.

[10] A key thread in the novella's plot is that the male character, Ren, also termed Prince Nineteen, helps his mother and sister escape their patriarchal country for that of the heroine, Lady Sun, which is led by a council of women.

[11] The novel charts Ying-ying and her foster father's search for what is initially assumed to be a cache of a hidden/lost treasure. But it is actually a cave of Buddhist scripture carved into stone, an archive created by Buddhist monks when their way of life appeared to be under threat.

[ST] No, it is not about the Mongols; they invaded during the Song dynasty (Tenth-Twelfth century CE), which follows the Tang. There was a decline in Buddhist influence during the Tang period, though it had become very popular in China earlier. The issue was that Buddhist temples were not taxed, which might have been seen as a problem internally (by the government). Buddhist monasteries were supported by lay people and the monks were not part of the economy –as workers or taxpayers. Since it was a loss of revenue, it led to occasional crackdowns by the government. One of my sources for these attacks was "Four Buddhist Persecutions in China" on Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation 2025). [I interjected here to ask, "and the cave of scripture/sculpture?"] There was a video that inspired the cave in *MBE*.[12]

[JK] You have written many different genres. What leads you to switch?

[ST] I am a working writer and while it is a great position to be in, I don't have a book that has broken out and made so much money that I can just write whatever I want. So I follow my artistic impulse but work with an eye on the marketplace. I wrote YA paranormal fantasy after my agent received a query about whether I might want to write a YA novel. YA was on the tail end of a hot streak in the industry [post-2010] and there was editorial interest, at least when the novel was acquisitioned. I wrote the manuscript for Elemental book 1 "on spec" because the query came again and my agent took it to auction. I worked on the series with Donna Bray at Harper Children's Balzer and Bray. But the series did not really do much in terms of sales.

My Mulan book [*The Magnolia Sword*] was another editorial ask. When I got that query, I decided to do it even though it was the lowest advance I had been offered. It seemed like the conversation regarding diversity was changing. I was slowly starting to gain a bit of consciousness [around race.] I had written so many white characters that I decided it was time to do an own-voices book.[13]

[I interjected to note that *MBE* already had some diversity since Ying-ying was biracial.] Yes, but she's only one character and half-English, half-Chinese. This book would be wholly Chinese from top to bottom.

I wrote *The Librarians* after being solicited to write it as well (and I never ask, "why me?") and it's my most diverse book. I hope there is a market for it. One of the main characters, the romance plot's heroine, is of Singaporean heritage and is a descendant of the couple in *MBE*. I had recently re-read *MBE* and became obsessed with it again for a week. I decided then that

[12] As noted above, I have written elsewhere of *MBE*'s China setting (and how it represents the waves of diverse people who lived there). I suggest that the novel's references to a history of attacks on monks and their attempts to preserve their ideas allude to the contemporary persecution of the Uyghur people and are a rejection of the idea of a monolithic Han past devoid of other ethnic and religious components (*Creating Identity* 186-88).

[13] "Own voices" is a term for work done by artists of color about characters who share their ethnicity or artists who share their characters' other minoritized identities.

Ying-ying and Leighton eventually settled in Singapore because it was a place where you could be both Chinese and English, and it was politically not turbulent. There is a throwaway line in *The Librarians* that one of Hazel's ancestors was an Atwood [i.e., *MBE*'s Ying-ying, who married her English lover, Leighton Atwood, at the end of that novel in 1891].

[I interjected to share that readers who are fans of *MBE* often get excited when Leighton shows up in the Lady Sherlock series in his missions as a British intelligence agent.]

I have a hope that one day Catherine Blade [Ying-ying] will make an appearance in the Lady Sherlock books but that story arc has unfolded so slowly –eight books and the timeline has only moved one year– we need to get out of the 1880s [since Ying-ying only comes to England in 1891]!

Writing the Lady Sherlock mysteries was a rare instance of an artistic decision. I had read *Beekeeper's Apprentice* around 2006 [a fanfic/reimagining of an aging Sherlock Holmes who teaches teen Mary Russell to be a detective] and thought a female Sherlock would be interesting. But I did not think of myself as a strong plotter then and since I had just started in historical romance, I thought I should continue that for a while. But the idea came back when the Cumberbatch/Freeman *Sherlock* was on the BBC (2010-2017). I was completing my last historical romance project around 2013 and I had run out of ideas for more, like I said. Historical romance authors were leaving traditional publishing for independent publishing because it was more lucrative and publishers were desperate to retain people who would write for them. Since I had already written a mystery in the Elemental series (*Perilous Sea*), I pitched the Lady Sherlock mysteries and Berkley gave me a three-book contract. So yeah, mostly I'm asked to do stuff, which I like a lot!

[JK] Can you share other industry assessment/memories? What about your interactions with other authors? What is the current state of the industry, including shifts into indie/self-publishing/Kickstarter publishing, such as the post-apocalyptic/"bunker romance" anthology *After the End: A Dystopian Romance Collection*?

[ST] My memories are of pleasant interactions. I've led Romance Writers of America workshops on craft at national conferences and online. I continue to do so with disaffiliated groups. I occasionally also teach classes for the Writers League of Texas (Austin).

Independent publishing is best for folks who like to manage every aspect of the process and are industrious. It is also for people who are data-minded and want to experiment with the options indie publishing offers. It's not my strength or inclination. Now it's more expensive to do self-publishing, too. In the past, costs were minimal to writers (just attending Romance Writers of America conferences maybe). I do have exclusive rights to British Commonwealth countries for the Lady Sherlock series and I do my own ebooks for those. The US publisher only has exclusive rights for it in North America and there is no UK publisher. *After the End: A Dystopian Romance*

Collection, which has my story "Prima," was mostly handled by Adriana Herrera and others.

[JK] How did this collection come about?

[ST] In August 2024, Ali Hazelwood reached out to ask if I would join a dystopian romance project. I liked the miscellaneous contributions. There was a group call with the other writers and we did some brainstorming around the concept of bunkers. I wasn't sure about it and countered with the idea of a "sea bunker" [an isolated ocean setting]. We discussed options for different framing devices or a common apocalypse background for all the stories but I wrote the first chapter of mine without a "first cause." I only came up with the idea of a fungus that ravaged the planet later. Just around that time, I was on a cruise to Singapore and Sydney; being there and knowing there were diverse members in the Kickstarter project made me decide to set the novella in that hemisphere.

I initially thought to put it in the South China Sea and then changed my mind and set it in the Luzon sea, by Taiwan and the Philippines, instead. The amnesia idea came to me after that. I had used amnesia a couple of times before: in *Tempting the Bride*, amnesia was how I introduced a new conflict between the couple; but my favorite magical amnesia story is the second novel, *The Perilous Sea*, in the Elemental series. I returned to that technique in "Prima." Amnesia, memory loss, and grief asks: who are you without your memories? It's about having to learn that again.

[JK] You play with time while doing that, and in increasingly complex ways, using other literary artifacts.

[ST] In playing with time, I want to reveal information at the moment it has most impact. [In "Prima," the story is doled out in present-day scenes interspersed with flashbacks from a decade ago, and includes a graphic novel that one protagonist creates that, unbeknownst to him, is drawing on his subconscious/erased memories of that previous time.]

The graphic novel in "Prima" was a way for the romance hero, Ren, to open his soul to Lady Sun. I was using the panels in his graphic novel like photos. In the novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the opening and closing snippets are photos of what is lost, as is [the use of other memory aids in] the movie *Memento*. The story structure mixes different elements of narrative and they all come together at the end.

[JK] What's next? For you and for romance?

[ST] My readers want more historical romance but it is "deep winter" for that. Some of my earlier historical romances might be reprinted in trade soon. I'm contracted for more Lady Sherlock books but I have rebooted my local romance writers group and I have some ideas for other books that mix genres and draw on themes found commonly in Asian romance. Stay tuned.

Reviews sent to the author: 29/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 20/07/2026

WORKS CITED

AAARI. 2023. "Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation." https://aaari.info/23-09-22kamble/.

Authoress. 2009. "Secret Agent Unveiled: Kristin Nelson." *Miss Snark's First Victim* (February 16). Accessed 16 Feb 2025. https://misssnarksfirstvictim.blogspot.com/2009/02/secret-agent-unveiled-kristin-nelson.html.

Atwood, Margaret. 2000. *The Blind Assassin*. McClelland and Stewart.

Clarke, Arthur C. 1953. *Childhood's End*. Ballantine.

Herbert, Frank. 1965. *Dune*. Chilton.

Hilton, James. 1933. *Lost Horizon*. Macmillan.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2020. "When Wuxia Met Romance: The Pleasures and Politics of Transculturalism in Sherry Thomas's *My Beautiful Enemy*." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 9 (March) https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2026.2635807.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2023. *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*. Indiana UP.

King, Laurie R. 1994. *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*. Minotaur.

Kwan, Kevin. 2013. *Crazy Rich Asians*. Doubleday.

Selinger, Eric Murphy. 2022. "The Wild Heart of the Continent: Love and Place in the Silk Road Novels of Sherry Thomas." In *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks. Routledge.

Thomas, Sherry. 2008. *Delicious*. Bantam.

Thomas, Sherry. 2008. *Private Arrangements*. Bantam.

Thomas, Sherry. 2009. *Not Quite a Husband*. Bantam.

Thomas, Sherry. 2012. *Tempting the Bride*. Berkley.

Thomas, Sherry. 2013. "This and That." Accessed 12 Feb 2025. https://sherrythomas.com/this-and-that.php.

Thomas, Sherry. 2013. *The Luckiest Lady in London*. Berkley.

Thomas, Sherry. 2013. *The Burning Sky*. Balzer+Bray.

Thomas, Sherry. 2014. *The Perilous Sea*. Balzer+Bray.

Thomas, Sherry. 2014. *The Hidden Blade*. Self-published.

Thomas, Sherry. 2014. *My Beautiful Enemy*. Berkley.

Thomas, Sherry. 2015. *The Burning Sky*. Balzer+Bray.

Thomas, Sherry. 2015. *The Immortal Heights*. Balzer+Bray.

Thomas, Sherry. 2015. *The One in My Heart.* Self-published.

Thomas, Sherry. 2016. *A Study in Scarlet Women.* Berkley.

Thomas, Sherry. 2017. "The Heart is a Universe." In *Sight Unseen*, ed. Judith Utz. Open Ink Press.

Thomas, Sherry. 2019. *The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan*. Lee and Low Books.

Thomas, Sherry. 2025. *The Librarians*. Penguin Random House.

Thomas, Sherry. 2025. "Prima." In *After the End: A Dystopian Romance Collection*, ed. Adriana Herrera. AH Romance Collections.

Wikimedia Foundation. 2025. "Four Buddhist Persecutions in China." Accessed 15 May 2026. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Buddhist_Persecutions_in_China.

CREATION

A THOUSAND TIMES AWAY

Eugenia Ossana
University of Zaragoza

MIL VECES LEJOS

I've lost Peressi's damn file. If only I could remember where the heck I left it. By eleven on the dot, I'll have to hand everything over to Gómez. It's quarter to eleven. I've rummaged through every possible nook in the cubicle, and nothing. Vanished folder. Perhaps it's in my tote. Let's see... Anything could turn up here. Frayed receipts, tampons, keys, mints, wallet, lipstick, foundation. Oops...! Mati's rosary (she'll kill me if she finds out I have it), brush, old pics, perfume samples, and unpaid gas bills. Bingo! On top of the filing cabinet at the end of the corridor. I left it there before going to the toilet. God*dammit!* Gómez, the brown-noser. He's fanning himself with the file.

"Done, luv. Stop fretting. I'll sort everything out and send it, as usual..."

Without a word, I sullenly go back to my den. I will never ever learn. Just wanted another job because I hated the frigging bakery, but this is not my thing. My desk is a pigsty like my head. I need a fag. Now. For the umpteenth time today, I promise myself to change. How did this photo get here? I'd forgotten I had it. The Flea and me. How old were we? About fifteen. I'm sticking out my tongue like a twit; with that old piercing on my nose. He's hugging me with his skinny arm and sleepy eyes. Maybe I dropped it in the address book within the ID photo pack. It's funny how I got hooked on the Flea. Although I'm not sure if hooked is the right word. Just a story.

Downtown is like the breath of a thousand devils. People are squeezing, stymied, bustling. I haven't forgotten anything, I guess. I always make the stupid supermarket list and leave it at home: blue cheese for Enrique, Brazilian roasted coffee, skimmed milk... From the window of a bar, an old man watches life go by and kind of pities me. This place used to be called *El Barracón* if my memory doesn't play tricks on me...

...we roamed downtown cafes, especially those gathering men with silky neck scarves poring over newspapers at arm's length, couples with five shopping bags, or prim ladies having Earl Grey tea with lemon pie.

"Just you watch and learn, mate," the Flea would tell me. And I followed, at a distance, feeling as if someone was just about to rat on me. Depending on the situation, he used either relentless insistence or sheer drama. After school, he always

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.12
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 243-248; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

managed to get some Chinese-made pen bunches from a "friendly supplier" and got down to business because he had to help his mam make ends meet.

"You'll see, in a bit, we'll rake in a few pesos," he bragged.

I tagged him along secretly, of course. If Mati found out, I'd be proper screwed, for sure. He would mess up his matted curls, leave his trainers in my custody, put on a Saint Bernard dog's face, and wait until the waiter was distracted. Attack.

"Sir, fancy buying something? I've got nowt to eat. It's only eight pesos."

And the others saying "No-thanks-dear-I-have-no-money-Eight-pesos?-you're-crazy-Pass-the-sugar-love-Oh!-Not-again"; or else, a distant look towards the horizon.

"Alright, I'll give it to you for seven... For four? I'll give you two for seven fifty; I'll even go down to two pesos. Look," and he'd wiggle his toes.

"Back again, are ya? I told ya to do one last time, you, useless sod. Go on, get lost!" the waiter would push him towards the door.

"No, this kind missus is about to buy me goods."

"Tell ya what, missus, I'll give it for two, deal?" clinging onto the waiter's arm and sweeping the floor.

Two pesos in his pocket. *El Barracón* didn't pay off; on to something else...

...my face was pressed against the window of the blue *Fiat* that morning when I arrived at the school of Los Telares, looking at the universe and all its silly creatures with disdain. What a beautiful redhead with a grumpy face, he said he had thought when he first saw me. I didn't want to get out of the car, so I stayed put to see if my dad would dare to slap me in front of everyone, the teacher included. The Flea chuckled in awe as my dad yanked me out of the seat. I was tired of change: Mum's illness, the new house, and now a new school. An eyesore, with those sunken, barred windows and that smell of dampness mixed with kerosene heating. The worst was having to endure the gaze of those kids in dirty smocks and stiff hair. That was the most distressing morning of my ten years.

"Did it hurt?" he prodded once we were in the back benches of the classroom.

I didn't even look at him, my gaze fixed on a distant point on the ceiling where some veins of dampness or a cobweb nested.

"Oh, that's nothing... You should see how me mum drags me outta bed when I don't want to get up!"

Cobweb, with bug and all.

"Do you know how to play *payanas*?" He showed me a few stones, although I only saw his long nails outlined with dirt...

I have only visited him once since he got caught. I didn't have much to say last time when I wanted to tell him about my stuff, my life with Enrique, the office job or Mati's latest surgery. He smiled to break the silence. He always smiles. As if those solid teeth were his only inheritance to face that crappy life of his. One of these days, I'll go see him.

...Mati never liked him. My grandma is a tough woman. Not even when widowed did she cry, in her thirties, when Dad and Aunt Berta were in primary school. Mati started a kind of café-bar, so she and my aunt cooked and served the railway temps mostly. Gran would never tie the knot again. Well, she would never have been able to find someone who could put up with her anyway. Later on, she broke her hip and came to live with my father, my brother and me. Mumsy was already gone. Even as handicapped as my gran was, she could never sit still. So, when my dad got laid off, she started cooking empanadas and pizzas on weekends that my brother Fito and I delivered on our retching *Zanella*.

I remember her face when I brought the Flea home for the first time. She watched him from head to toe, clenching her jaw, kneading the whitish dough with her chubby arms full of flour. Without turning her back, she blurted out:

"Kiddo, ain't it about time you headed home? Your mum'll be worried sick!"

He was the only friend I had in the new school. When I suggested that he help us with the delivery, he was delighted.

"Don't you dare," Mati snapped. "If anyone sees him turn up in that state, we won't sell so much as half a slice of pizza. Bet this darkie already given you nits!"

He came over a couple more times, and one day, everything was fine, he said, but every time Mati looked at him, he felt like he had to wash his hands or take a bath, and the dirt wouldn't come off. It was stuck, he said. So, he waited for my brother and me to get on the motorcycle and guided us on that rickety bike of his. We chatted and laughed about anything, the Flea giving us directions, of course. We planned to do a bunch of things when we grew up. To start with, we wanted to be American TV series actors: *Baywatch*-style, then lifeguards or Formula One drivers. After much deliberation, we opted for a dulce de leche ice cream shop.

"I wish I could have one with three scoops covered in chocolate every day. Ahhh...!" he squinted his eyes. And out of the blue, looking in the distance, he mumbled:

"I don't wanna end up like me old man. He don't even know me name..."

I'm smoking too much. Enrique tells me to quit; it'll be harder if I get pregnant. A baby. I can't imagine myself with one. Swallowed by the couch, I doze while he's chain-zapping half-nude butts, gutter news, soccer goals, and the latest gem from direct shopping. There's a stack of dirty dishes I'm too lazy to wash. Enrique insists it's time for a baby to brighten our lives. Who knows? Then we'd have to leave it with a nanny most of the time. A loop of smoke surfs towards the window and dissolves into the hot February night. I only see a green curtain from the floor opposite, always open. A desk with a large lamp lit and several books piled on the side. No one has ever sat down to read them or tidy them up. A thick one with a red spine is always underneath.

"I'm going to bed," Enrique says, handing me the remote control.

"There in a minute. I'll finish the fag."

He's balding like his father. I don't want to wash the dishes. I don't want a baby. I don't want to smoke. The lamp in the opposite window has gone out, but the green curtain remains almost visible. I light another cigarette.

...Marina, Marisa, or Mariela was the name of that girlfriend of his I met. My bestie Sonia and I were bored to death and went out for some booze at that music joint. The tide of people sweated, rubbed against each other, and surrendered to the heat and the beer ("Te esperé bajo la lluvia dos horas, ¿Cuántas?...). The rhythm of a distant popular song wrestled amidst the out-of-tune mass... ("Mil horas, como un perro. Cuando llegaste, me miraste y me dijiste..."). The Flea had repeated his third year in high school and said he wouldn't continue... ("...estás mojado, ya no te quiero ... Ah, ah, ah!"[1])

"You have to keep up with school, Flea."

"Teachers don't want me in, mate. Haven't you seen how they always look for trouble to throw me out? Or they're just waiting for me to slip up so they can shove me in with the 'special needs' lot. Poor buggers. It's a bloody circus, Colo. 'Ladies and gentlemen! I'm going to ask for a few minutes of your kind attention.'"

We were friends, but something had changed...

"This is my girl," he said, looking at me.

On impulse, he took me to the dance floor, leaving her with a half-burst bubblegum balloon.

"Do you like her?" His breath reeked of beer, and his eyes fiercely fixed on mine.

"Who?"

"My girlfriend."

"As long as *you* like her..."

The music embraced us; arms, necks, and waists entwined with some urgency. I felt a tickle, a twitch of his body against mine. His voice caressed my ear.

"If you wanted, Colo..." his hand sought under my shirt. I looked at him with accelerated breathing.

"No... I don't want to."

My face was burning...

This day won't be like all the others. It started off with a foolish argument with Enrique because yesterday I forgot who-knows-what about his stupid Moon diet; the boss preaching on and on about something I must have done wrong, not to mention Gómez's usual small talk at ten o'clock break.

"Bad night, babe?"

...autumn afternoon. I was leaving work at the bakery.

"Have... you heard?" Sonia was stuttering. "The Flea is on the run. He and two guys robbed a house."

---

[1] "I waited for you in the rain for two hours (How many?) / (A thousand hours) Like a dog / When you arrived, you looked at me and said /...you're soaked, I don't love you anymore." My translation. Andrés Calamaro, *Mil Horas*, Los Abuelos de la Nada, 1983, track 5 on *Vasos y Besos* (PolyGram).

"Robbed a house?"

"Robbed, like... robbed, yeah... They were kinda high, and they say the owner tried to call the police or escape or something, and one of them... had a gun and... shot him. Bang! S...screwed."

"A gun, the Flea?"

"Thing is... the man's wife saw them because... the twits had their faces uncovered. So now they're hiding somewhere, and the cops are on their toes. He says he wants to see you."

"What? Who?"

"And who do you think, you jerk? The Flea."

"Isn't he on the run?"

"Yes, but we know where he is..."

I barely survived the morning in the office, fighting tooth and nail with memories. I'm fed up. Why did this bloody photo show up? I don't want to go home. I don't want to wait for the two or three muted days with Enrique. I want somewhere to go, but not to that place I now call home.

..."What the hell did you do, Flea?"

"Nothing. They said it'd be easy, that there was cash lying about. Anyway... why bother explaining it to you, Colo? You've always been a bloody coward... Come with me, Colo. They'll sort me out some bus tickets to San Juan. If you here, it's for a reason, ain't it?"

"I came... I came... what the hell? I don't know why I came. Cos' I'm just plain stupid, but you can't go on like this, Flea. You're going down the drain, mate! Do you remember the dulce de leche ice cream?"

He smiled bitterly...

I just climb the first bus I find to the end of the line. Number 78. I'm about twenty blocks from the massive greyish building. I challenge the late February heat in these office-like plain high heels. I sit on a step at the entrance and watch the result of the walk: two pearly blisters. There, in one of those identical windows with humidity smudges, there. I know it's visiting day, but I doubt whether the lie I've decided to tell at control will be convincing.

"Come in," the official says without looking up from my ID.

I walk down the long, empty hallway that bounces a whitish glow as if eager to run away. There's not much hustle; the prisoners must be sleeping. My heart wants to take off. I wonder if it's the place or the low ceiling, but my hands are sweating. Finally, someone appears around the corner. The Flea is escorted by a tall, burly guard who stands to the side, looking without seeing. He's thinner. He stops in his tracks, trying to guess who I am. I pretend to smile. The blisters burn. He walks purposely slowly, not taking his eyes off me once. We matter-of-factly head for the vis-à-vis meeting room. We sit at an awkward distance, looking at each other from time to time without speaking.

"So, you're my new gal, Colo?" This time, there's no smile. His eyes are foggy, his hair tightly cropped, a two-day stubble. I clumsily fumble for a cigarette. I offer him one.

"How are you, Flea?"

"Does it really bother you, Colo? We ain't seen each other in a fair while," he says with obvious reproach. He soon offers a truce:

"How's it going?"

"Fine... well... What do I know, Flea. No. I don't know." He looks at me sadly.

I take the photo out of my purse. My throat releases the choke, and the tears break free from time. He sits crestfallen, watching our frozen faces on the still glossy paper. I cry in silence for a long time until we look at each other. There's only unease. He smells my cheek, following the path of the mascara, and kisses me, savouring my face. I taste the salt on his lips. His hands subtly trace my neck. Blood opens my floodgates and drowns my body. Gómez's sneer. Mati stares at me. The bar in the corner. "Ain't I good enough for ya?" Payanas at ten-thirty-recess. "Come with me." I wonder if I am here or a thousand lives away. "We should be on the family way by now. What are we waiting for? You aren't getting any younger." I don't want that life for myself. Dulce de leche and to the hell with everything. "I handed myself in to the coppers." A thousand hours, like a dog. It's useless; I can't stop the outburst. "I'm going to be someone." Green curtain. The red book. The light has gone out. I'm here. I want. I want. I want. I. Want.

The second line has emerged clearly. It never fails, they say. I carry the test in my purse, and every now and then, I glance at it to convince myself that it is real. I told Enrique I was pregnant yesterday, and the Flea was the child's father. The poor guy still can't understand a thing. Neither can I. A couple of weeks ago, I asked for a transfer vacancy in the office, a position in the west, almost on the border with Chile. I'm trying like crazy to forget that I have only one cigarette left. I am on a bus heading for San Juan. The Flea has ten years with a chance of parole. Maybe someday I'll tell him. The mountains in the distance are hooded in snow; the air must be getting cool. I'd better doze a bit. It's still a long way to go.

Review of *Cultures, Narratives, and Concepts* edited by Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Marcin Trojszczak (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025, pp. 298, ISBN: 9783031861581).

The collective volume *Cultures, Narratives and Concepts* is compiled under the direction of two reputed Polish linguists currently working at the University of Applied Sciences in Konin: Professors Barbara Lewnadowska-Tomaszczyk and Marcin Trojszczak. Additionally, the volume is a part of the book series *Second Language Learning and Teaching* (SLLT) edited by Professor Miroslaw Pawlak.

Regarding its contents, the book masterfully covers a wide range of specialized topics, all of them in relation to literary studies or cognitive and cultural linguistics. Furthermore, several chapters are concerned with online and media discourse, as well as Artificial Intelligence.

The volume is divided into two parts: Cultures and Conceptualizations and Cultures and Narratives. In total, it is composed of 16 chapters, which are classified according to their specialization. The first one contains 6 chapters. The first three focus on different facets of conceptualization, while the last 3 research cultural conceptualization in health discourse. Most of these chapters build their studies by utilizing conceptual metaphors and Critical Discourse Analysis as their theoretical frameworks. The second part of the volume is composed of 10 chapters dealing with the issues of cultures in various types of narratives. Several chapters aim to explore multiple aspects of cultures and how they are portrayed in literary works. Others revolve around translation studies and the use of Artificial Intelligence.

The volume begins with an introduction written by both editors, Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Marcin Trojszczak, where they explain how the chapters are organized and their content.

The opening paper by Boryana Bratanova studies a myriad of national mottos of world countries within the framework of cultural linguistics. Through an in-depth analysis, the author provides an insightful perspective into the cultural relations between national mottos and nationals, as well as demonstrates that this specific type of political discourse reflects the way in which people conceptualize the notion of statehood and the emotions tied to it. Similarly, in the following chapter, Nina Shtok uses the method of Critical Discourse Analysis to explore the concept of the national "We" constructed in the official "addresses to the nation" by Russian President Vladimir Putin during the first year of the Ukrainian war. At the same time, it delineates who the Russian government considers its enemy, the "Other," namely, the United States, the Ukrainian government, and NATO.

The third chapter adopts a similar line of thought, as it revolves around the political discourses of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. By applying the methodology of Critical Metaphor Analysis to dissect his speeches, the author is able to explore the complicated relationship between the European Union and Albania, where the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.13
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 249-251; ISSN: e-2530-8335
Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC-SA)

former is described as a proud bride, a building, a parent, or even a fortress.

The final three chapters in the section Cultures and Conceptualizations study cultural concepts in health discourse. In the first of these three contributions, Joseph Jaoko Ochieng applies the methodology of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the numerous metaphors that Dholuo speakers employ to refer to HIV/AIDS patients. The second chapter, authored by Kamila Ciepiela, aims to demonstrate that patients use metaphors to describe their medical conditions. In order to do this, interviews held by the author with Polish patients who suffer from Turner syndrome are analyzed thoroughly. The final chapter of this section discusses the contemporary online phenomena of the Sick Style Community. Ramona Teresa Plitt uses a corpus of German and English Instagram posts to study and compare the language used by these communities and tries to explain how their culture and preconceptions may influence it.

The second part of the volume, Cultures and Narratives, begins with a paper by Kathryn M. Hudson. The chapter studies the cultural contact between the multiracial Indigenous communities in the Southeast of the United States, Euro-American and Afro-American communities by researching the stories of snake and water turkey.

The eighth chapter sheds light into a new, contemporary form of communication: memes. Lucia La Causa analyzes a corpus of memes made by Egyptian users during the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak and the government of Mohamed Morsi. The author brilliantly illustrates how Internet users are able to denounce social and political acts through memes, even in a highly surveyed society like Egypt's.

In the ninth chapter, Monika Tosik surveys 100 East African journalists. The results show the struggles journalists face when choosing between a local and a global view on journalism. The paper encourages a more local-based approach to journalism, especially in African countries, as opposed to the Western approach that is currently promoted around the world due to their cultural distinctions.

By analyzing two American books, *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance and *Educated* by Tara Westover, Karl Wood highlights the differences and similarities between the two memoirs. To do this, the author contrasts them with the American Dream and its narrative of upward class mobility.

Ewa Urbaniak-Rybicka focuses on the novel *What Strange Paradise* by Omar Ell Akkad in the eleventh chapter. The paper wisely discusses "the plight of the displaced" (p. 207) through the themes of displacement, transgression, performativity, and transcendence. Furthermore, it reflects on the concept of Canadianness and its relationship with transculturality.

María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia analyzes the 2019 novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo through a transcultural feminist perspective. The author demonstrates that the novel deconstructs the concepts of culture, gender, civilization, and nation. The multiple narratives and characters, mostly Anglo-Nigerian women, show the hardships experienced by people who come from different nations of the former English Empire, even if their family has been living in England for generations.

Two chapters are concerned with the issues that might arise when translating a literary text. The first paper compares the French translation of the novel *Zoqaq Al Midaq* by Naguib Mahfuz with the original and expounds on how the strategy of rationalization allows translators to produce a more natural and fluent version for the French speakers by erasing the multiplicity and rhythmic difference of the Arabic language. On the other hand, the paper also demonstrates that employing this strategy can be dangerous because it distorts the nature of original text. In a further effort to emphasize how translators can deform the original intent behind literary works, the second chapter examines how religious phrases are translated into Polish. For this, the author analyzes several translations of Charles Dickens' books in the nineteenth century. Theoretical distinctions like salience and mediation, among others, allow the author to conclude that Polish translators would adjust the text to exaggerate religious overtones while translating other fragments in a more literal way.

The final two chapters study the interplay of concepts, narratives, and cultures more generally. Ghaleh et al. use the Hofstede approach and a

questionnaire to analyze the cultural indicators of respondents from both Germany and Iran. Consequently, they are able to compile and outline these countries' tourism cultures. The final chapter in the book researches the trustworthiness of AI in the cultural and social context. Lewandowska and Sousa, too, use a questionnaire to realize their study with the intent of asking interviewees their opinion on AI applications. Their research shows that age and gender are important factors contributing to the user's willingness to use AI technology.

The bipartite structure of this study allows for a neat organization of the contents within the volume. Each contribution poses a multifaceted and rich approach to the themes of cultures, narratives, and concepts. Another important aspect to note is the book's cohesiveness. Chapters follow similar methodologies and conduct studies on related subjects. All in all, the volume provides insightful and in-depth perspectives on contemporary issues such as AI.

Reviews sent to the authors: 23/7/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 1/9/2026

Lucía BRANDÁRIZ PUENTE
Universidade da Coruña

ANNUAL REPORT: *RCEI* EDITORIAL PROCESS

The average time that the *RCEI* editorial staff takes to publish an essay submitted to this journal is 9 months of straight work, from reading to accepting, editing, proofreading, and finally to print. Our reviewers are senior faculty, including members of *RCEI* Editorial Board, and those who have successfully been published in our journal or elsewhere.

Statistics:
No. of essays submitted to *RCEI* 2026 issues: 37.
No. of essays accepted for publication in *RCEI* during 2026: 27.
Average number of reviewers per essay: 2,4.
Average time between submission and acceptance: 3,6 months.
Average time between acceptance and publication: 2,3 months.

80% of manuscripts submitted to *RCEI* 2026 issues have been accepted for publication.

PEER REVIEWERS FOR *RCEI* 93: OCTOBER 2026

Our gratitude to the following referees for their help and generous time contribution:

REVIEWERS

Juan José Bermúdez De Castro (University of the Balearic Islands)

Núria Casado Gual (University of Lleida)

Jorge Diego Sánchez (University of Salamanca)

Marta Fernández Morales (University of Oviedo)

Carolina Fernández Rodríguez (University of Oviedo)

Paloma Fresno Calleja (University of the Balearic Islands)

Macarena García-Avello Fernández (University of Cantabria)

Isabel González Díaz (University of La Laguna)

Alejandro Fermín López De Vergara Méndez (University of La Laguna)

María Jesús López Sánchez-Vizcaíno (University of Córdoba)

María Jesús Llarena Ascanio (University of La Laguna)

Núria Mina Riera (University of Lleida)

Heike Missler (Universität des Saarlande)

Juan Ignacio Oliva (University of La Laguna)

Mercedes Pérez Agustín (University Complutense of Madrid)

Inmaculada Pérez Casal (University of Santiago de Compostela)

Miquel Pomar Amer (University of the Balearic Islands)

Sara Prieto García-Cañedo (University of Alicante)

Carla María Rodríguez González (University of Oviedo)

Pilar Somacarrera Íñigo (Autonomous University of Madrid)

Pilar Villar Argáiz (University of Granada)



Servicio de Publicaciones
Universidad de La Laguna