THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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Sara Martín Alegre
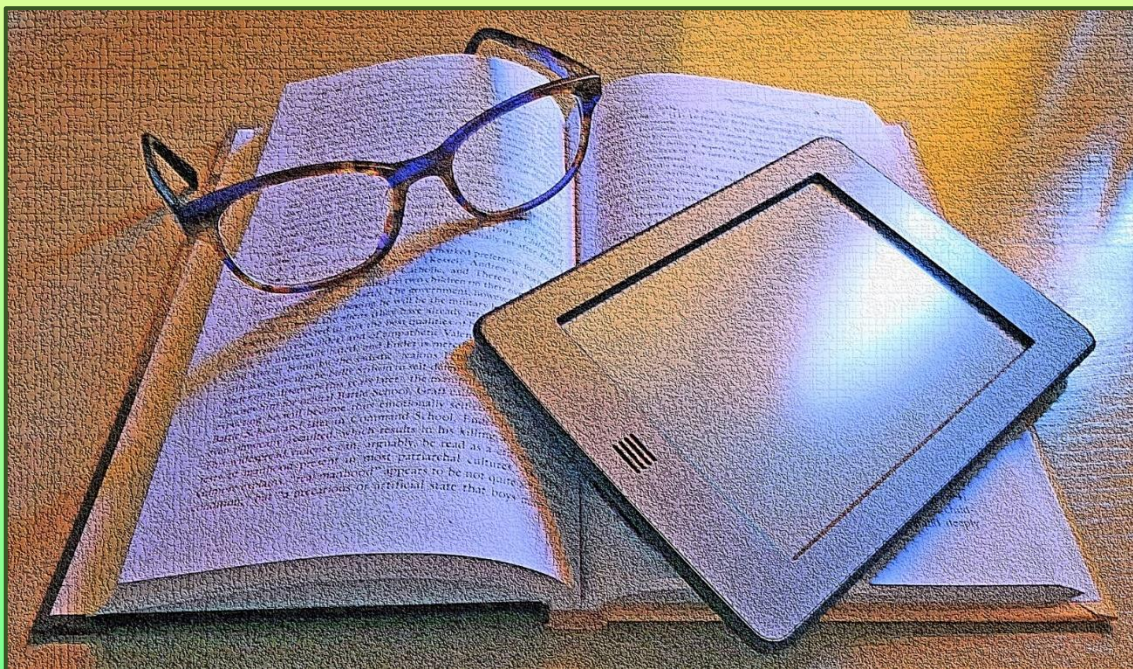
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7 September 2020 / NO JOY IN TEACHING LITERATURE THIS YEAR: ON COVID-19 AND RETURNING TO CLASS

I should be celebrating in today's post, the first one in the academic year 2020-2021, that this blog is now ten years old. Instead of happiness, however, the feeling that necessarily affects my writing now and that makes my nights so restless is fear. Fear that the return to class next week means being infected with Covid-19, with who knows what consequences, and fear that I might infect those who live with me and endanger lives I love even more than mine. This is not at all the spirit in which a teacher should start a new year and I'm writing today to leave a record of that fear, hoping that by next semester I can read this post and laugh at my concerns. Right now I feel no joy. I do look forward to teaching Literature again but not at the cost of my health, which is very much at risk, and my peace of mind, which I have lost.

Like all my colleagues in Spain, I have been working from home since 14 March. I taught about four weeks in the classroom before lockdown forced me to go online, with no major problem as I already knew this crisis was coming (the news in *The Guardian* about the plague in China had been scaring me already for at least one month). My experience of teaching online using an asynchronous model, combining forums and weekly activities, and without using streaming, worked very well to the point that I awarded the highest marks since the implementation of the new BA degrees ten years ago. I even published a very handsome [e-book](#) on American in documentary film with my students. In view of this, I have been defending, to no avail, each teacher's right to choose whether to continue online or return to class. Like the rest of us who prefer staying online I find myself, however, forced to return to the classroom against my better judgement and forced to assume a serious risk to my health. Ironically, many teachers in my Department who could have plead their age (past 60) or their poor health and stay home have chosen to teach in person, which totally baffles me.

I have been imagining what the first day will be like and I see myself first on a very crowded train, which no minimal social distance at all. I work at a campus university and it takes me about 30 minutes to get there. It is just impossible to run more trains and thus make more room for passengers; in fact, the railway management had already acknowledged last year that trains are running at more than 100% their capacity and this is not going to change because of Covid-19. Next, I see myself reaching the also overcrowded building of my school, which will not really be emptier despite the measures taken by the Dean's office.

In my own case, I have been given a larger classroom to accommodate my 45 students in Victorian Literature on Tuesdays, but with no guarantee of the necessary 1'5m social distancing required. I have been asked to split my class in two groups, in rigorous alphabetical order to keep track of eventual contagions, and see them on alternate Thursdays, ideally streaming my lessons for those who cannot be in the classroom (but who will possibly be in the school corridors waiting to attend another course taught in similar ways). I am totally against the idea of streaming my lessons and having people I cannot see watch me teach and, so, I have decided to have my students share each other's class notes and my own notes. This morning I have been working on a calendar to guarantee that everyone will get sufficient hours for the needs of the course and, basically, I need to teach more compact lessons, with less time for student participation. That might work if I focus more intensely on the assessment requirements and cut any extras that might enrich the students' learning about the Victorian Age.

In my visions of Tuesday next week, I enter next my classroom wearing a facemask and I see 45 equally masked students. I see no point in checking their names

for I will never be able to recognize them. I must carry, or will be provided with (that is not clear), disinfectant to clean the table and be able to leave my notes on it, and the computer to use my USB. The windows need to be open for fifteen minutes between sessions but I intend to keep them open all the time. I don't know yet whether I am supposed to shorten my lessons by fifteen minutes at the beginning, I don't know who to ask. It's now September and still beautifully warm (the air conditioning might even be on for the virus to circulate…) and I don't know what will happen on colder days in November but the windows will stay open. I will buy and carry my own blackboard eraser and chalk, as we've been told that they cannot be shared. I don't trust that the eraser will be properly disinfected, as we have been told it will be.

We have been told that we can teach without the facemask on provided we are two metres away from the students and even though facemasks are now compulsory in all private and public spaces. I have been using so far surgical masks of the basic type but my pharmacist tells me I should wear KN-95 respirators on the train, which possibly means I should also wear them in class. There is no way, however, I can properly breath and project my voice with a facemask of any type on and this has me very, very worried. The masks were never designed to be worn for so many hours and much less to teach in big classrooms, so I have no idea right now about what I should do. I don't know either how one communicates with masked students whose expressions I cannot read at all.

So, supposing I manage to teach for seventy-five minutes without suffocating and feeling cut off from the masked persons before me next comes the nightmarish time to leave the classroom and join the hundreds of persons abandoning the other classrooms in the same corridor. The authorities have limited gatherings to ten persons but all the universities will have gatherings in many classrooms of fifty and more. There is, besides, absolutely no way the occupation of the corridors, the bathrooms, or the cafeteria can be limited to safe numbers (no problem in the library, though, the least crowded space always). I have been given the choice to be available for tutorials either online or in person, by the way. I chose to be available online any day of the week at my students' convenience but I was told that, according to the Dean's office, I must be in my office for online tutorials. Luckily for me, I have a big office and I have chosen to meet my students there at a safe two metres distance, with open windows and disinfecting the chairs they may use. I hope this relative proximity gives a human touch to any possible meeting, though I'll try to solve problems by e-mail if possible.

No doubt staying home all this time and carefully managing my meeting friends and family may have turned me into a bit of a misanthrope. Perhaps that's not the right word but I don't know if the Covid-19 crisis has already given us a word for the fear of personal contact. I have never liked crowds but that is very different from feeling that my 45 students are a danger to me, and I to them. To be honest, I fear that they are a much bigger danger to me than I am to them because they are part of the demographic now responsible for the largest number of contagions. I'm sorry to say that the young have been breaking the safety rules implemented by the authorities more than other age groups and, with no previous testing, we teachers simply cannot know how to assess the danger in our classrooms. One of my colleagues also made the point that by forcing students to attend lessons we are committing a sort of moral fault, for they are indeed also risking their health. Covid-19 has killed many more older people but the young have also been affected, sometimes cruelly. Nobody is safe as we all know by now, so why insist on making classes presential?

After introducing myself on the first day, I will write on the blackboard the word 'candid' and will invite my students to have a candid conversation about why we need to risk our life by meeting in a classroom in the middle of a truly scary plague. I know that, right now, this means assuming a totally unnecessary risk but I want to hear from them what they expect from me and why, all of a sudden, attending classes has become such

a big issue. Every year students cut classes, and nobody checks on them, or miss them because they are ill and nobody tells the teachers that we have to make up for these absences by teaching online. Absurdity and self-denial rule our return to class. Some of my colleagues are telling me that we'll start next week and will close down the week after for there is no way Covid-19 can be controlled in a university environment. That might be a correct assessment of the situation but even just one day of teaching is a risk we cannot assume. I find that primary and secondary schools are a different matter, for kids stay in the same classroom and don't move about all over the place. In universities, masses of teachers and students circulate from classroom to classroom, which will also increase the circulation of the virus. I think of the cafeteria and I shiver…

I am not saying, then, that universities should abandon presential teaching for online teaching for good but I am saying that we live in exceptional times and that there is absolutely no need to return to the classrooms. We have been receiving these days cheerful messages from the Rector's and the Dean's office and though I know they have been sent with the best intention they have done nothing to appease my fears, quite the opposite. I have kept so far my concentration and carried on with my academic work at home but I tried to prepare my first session for next week today and I simply couldn't focus. I have serious difficulties to believe that what I teach is so relevant to myself and my students as to want to risk my health, much more so when I could perfectly fulfil my teaching duties online. I know that some might think I am a coward, or exaggerating the risks, but there are two kinds of negationists right now: those who claim that Covid-19 does not even exist and those who claim that the return to class is safe. It is not.

Good luck to all of you, keep safe. If you can.

13 September 2020 / TEACHING LITERATURE AS IMMERSIVE HISTORY: A LOOK AT THE 19TH CENTURY PAST

I have been reading this weekend Ruth Goodman's fascinating volume *How to Be a Victorian: A Dawn to Dusk Guide to Victorian Life* (2014) in preparation for the new course I start tomorrow. Goodman is a rather well-known freelance British historian who makes a living as a consultor to museums, theatre, television and schools of all types. She is known not only for her books—who wouldn't want to read *How to Behave Badly in Elizabethan England: A Guide for Knaves, Fools, Harlots, Cuckolds, Drunkards, Liars, Thieves, and Braggarts* (2018)?—but also for the TV series she has hosted, which include the six-part BBC series *Victorian Farm* (2009). In it Goodman and others recreate everyday life on a farm in Shropshire in the mid-19th century, as it supposedly was. In fact, much to my surprise, there is quite a remarkable number of TV programmes of this type, based on the idea of the immersive historical experience, on both sides of the Atlantic and other countries like Germany.

Goodman peppers *How to Be a Victorian* with comments on her personal experience of cooking Victorian food or using Victorian clothes and cosmetics. Her case is a very extreme form of immersive experience in the past (she also specializes in Tudor times) but it is also closely connected with the passion for historical re-enactment that drives so many amateur clubs and that is almost indispensable in today's museums. Beyond this, a quick internet search beginning with Goodman's Wikipedia page soon takes me from the TV series she has participated in to the debates on how Virtual Reality technology will alter the understanding of the past in educational contexts. The debate has been going on for more than a decade now, triggered by the commercialisation of the first VR headgear sets, though I must say that VR cannot give the bodily experience

Goodman aims at. One thing is walking a Victorian street in a VR environment (with no smells…) and quite another wearing a Victorian corset or, as Goodman did, keeping your hair clean Victorian-style with no shampoo for four months.

On the other hand, as Patrick T. Allen argues in an article published in *The Conversation*, "A Brief History of Immersion, Centuries before VR", "immersion is a technique much older than technology. It is the key to storytelling, in literature, film, videogames, even in the spoken stories told by our ancestors around the campfire". He makes, of course, a very good point but even so what I learn from Goodman, and from so many years teaching Victorian Literature, is that our immersion in a text of the past is woefully superficial in many senses. Goodman's detailed description of everyday life makes me see the characters in Victorian fiction with an unexpected fullness. I can now imagine the underwear of the richer ones and what they had for breakfast, but also notice the absence of the poorest ones, except marginally in Dickens, Gaskell, and a few others. Indeed, preparing these days a PowerPoint presentation on Victorian fashions for my students I couldn't help noticing once again how classist our approach to teaching 19th century Literature is. I don't think that the 20th and the 21st century have done much better in representing the working classes but one might say that working-class life is conspicuously missing in the fiction of the century in which the Industrial Revolution changed everything.

Other type of volumes aim at enhancing the immersive historical experience that reading the Literature of the past always is. I started reading *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist-the Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England* (1994) by Daniel Pool but I soon stopped, frankly overwhelmed. Unlike Goodman, who mentions Victorian fiction only occasionally, Pool has paid attention to all the details that may baffle any contemporary reader and written a prodigious volume which is partly a collection of brief essays and partly an extensive glossary. Unfortunately he begins with a description of 19th century currency, in the section he calls 'The Basics,' which made me throw up my hands in despair. I have never found the energy to understand guineas, sovereigns, and crowns and the question is whether I should find it. It's the same with the types of carriages or other abstruse matters such as the difference between a baron and a baronet (the former is a peer, the latter is top of the gentry but plain Sir, not Lord).

This means that, unless we are scholars preparing a critical edition, no matter how many times we have read a text many small details will escape our notice. In part because there is always a limit to the energy we are willing to invest on reading a text and in part because we miss much information implicitly available to the original readers or that needn't be included for their sake. Even so, they must also have missed much context for many Victorian novels were set decades before their date of publication. Just to give an example, imagine a twenty-year-old reader of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published in 1848. The heroine, Helen Graham, refers in her diary to events that happen around 1827, when my imaginary reader hadn't even been born (and incidentally, not Victoria but her uncle George IV was king). How was this young reader supposed to reconstruct that past? Did s/he bother to ask about life twenty years before? Where could s/he have found the relevant information? I am just a few clicks away from images of the 1820s on the internet but what could my imaginary reader check back in the 1840s? Remember that public libraries as we know them today were established later, from the 1850s onward.

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there", L.P. Hartley famously wrote as the first line of his novel *The Go-Between* (1953), and he is absolutely right. What is refreshing in Goodman's perspective is how she takes this 'differently' to celebrate it. Take the matter of personal hygiene, which always baffles and disgusts any person thinking of a past when the daily shower routine was missing. Goodman gently

reminds us that a daily shower is a luxury we enjoy, precisely, thanks to Victorian advances in indoors plumbing and electricity (imagine washing your hair daily with no hair dryer!). The flushing toilet may not have been generalized in Victorian times but Victorian entrepreneurs made it a desirable domestic fixture. Goodman makes this point but at the same time she praises to the sky the sensible management of human waste, above all in the countryside where contraptions such as the earth toilet resulted in abundant compost.

What she is saying, then, but we tend to forget is that people living in the past were not barbarians who didn't know better as we often assume but persons making the most of their circumstances. Goodman comments, for instance, that corsets were not really less comfortable than underwired bras or shapewear (of the kind Kim Kardashian uses and sells) but we tend of think just of the questionable practice of extreme tight lacing, which is what caused the bodily deformities so often criticized. In a similar vein, we know that high-heeled shoes are absurd but this doesn't stop many women from wearing them and even claiming they feel comfortable. Goodman also makes a point of constantly stressing that many basic ingredients in Victorian cosmetics and prepared foodstuffs are still present in current products. There are elements of the Victorian past that scare her—she basically says that babies were routinely poisoned by concerned parents who fed them dangerous medicine—but she makes on the whole a very good defense of Victorian ingenuity and capacity to correct the worst situations. Life in 1890s Britain, thus, does not appear to be substantially worse than life in the post-WWII 1950s.

So, does it help to know about flushing toilets or about the difference between a crinoline and a bustle to understand Victorian fiction? I think it does, and very much. Some authors may not care very much to describe the background of their fiction but look at what Bram Stoker does in *Dracula* (1897). We miss the horror of his tale if we miss that Count Dracula comes from a medieval land to terrorize ultra-modern Britain. Stoker's characters put together a record of the vampire chase using all kind of modern devices (a typewriter, a phonograph… both 1870s inventions) and they follow him back to his lair thanks to perfectly reliable train schedules. Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film adaptation was the first to understand Stoker's ultra-modernity. It even has a beautiful scene in which Dracula follows Mina into a cinema, which is not anachronistic as it might seem: "The first public film shows in the UK to a paying audience took place in London in 1896. On 21 February that year, the Polytechnic Institute on Regent Street hosted a display of the Lumière brothers' new moving-picture device, the Cinématographe".

Reading Goodman's volume and other excellent books such as Judith Flanders's *The Victorian House*: *Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (2003) I cannot help being impressed by the massive effort Victorians made to improve matters. "The greatest invention of the nineteenth century", Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "was the invention of the method of invention", as he is right indeed. It can be argued that many of these inventions resulted in the hell that factory life was for many 19th century children, women, and men. Also that others were delayed for suspicious sexist reasons: the washing machine was invented by one Jacob Christian Schäffer (in 1767!) but not commercialized. American inventor Nathaniel Briggs was granted the first patent for a hand-operated washing machine in 1797, and others followed in his steps, but only the introduction of Alva J. Fisher's electric Thor washer in 1908 started changing domestic life for women. As Goodman claims, doing the laundry was the worst chore Victorian women had to face, particularly those in the working classes and in service to the middle- and upper-classes. One never reads about these matters in Victorian Literature, in which clothes are worn and soiled with little mention of who makes and cleans them.

To sum up, then, yes indeed reading the fiction of the past is an immersive historical experience but a limited one—as limited as reading the fiction of the present, which can hardly make sense of the widespread use of the smartphone and the impact

of the social media (can it??). I am not sure how far deep into the past we need to understand what we read or if we have simply to handle the background as well we can, which is possibly the only practical option. Let's be at least aware that in the past things were done differently, and enjoy the difference.

20 September 2020 / BOYS, GIRLS, AND SEX: STATE OF THE MATTER

American journalist Peggy Orenstein became a much sought-after expert on girls before becoming herself a mother, at which point she realized that theory hardly ever matches practice. Her book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (2012) describes the discomfiture caused by her inability to steer her daughter Daisy away from the glaring pink world of girls' toys and the allure of the Disney princesses. Next came Orenstein's insightful exploration of sexuality among high school and college female students in the USA, *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (2016). As she herself explains, this volume brought in many petitions for a companion study of boys, which she has recently published as *Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity* (2020). I must clarify that neither volume is specifically addressed to girls or boys but, rather, to the adults interested in their experiences. *Boys and Sex* is, therefore, similar in its main theses but very different from *Respect: Everything a Guy Needs to Know About Sex, Love, and Consent* (2019) by Swedish sex educator Inti Chavez Perez. Thus, whereas Orenstein wonders how many US boys really know about the clitoris, Chavez Perez gives his target male readers detailed didactic information about its location and functionality.

Orenstein's portrait of teen US sexuality is necessarily limited because she focuses her attention on just a handful of informants (87 girls for the first book, about 100 boys for the second) mostly in high school and college, thus ignoring the many youths in other situations. It would be actually interesting to learn whether sex among the young is similar across class and educational differences. Her informants are, besides, overwhelmingly white. Orenstein makes a point of discussing race, especially in the book about the boys, but she deals only with non-white young men immersed in all-white colleges, with all the difficulties this entails. Certainly, their racially-marked position has a significant impact on these boys' chances to meet sexual partners, given the covert and overt racism they often encounter even in liberal colleges. As you have possibly guessed, the sexuality which Orenstein explores in both books is mostly heterosexual though, to be honest, she does not really endorse its current practices. My impression, from both books, is that lesbian girls and gay guys are navigating 'the complicated new landscape,' to quote from Orenstein's title, with more maturity than their heterosexual peers despite still rampant homophobia. Orenstein, in any case, tries to be as inclusive as possible, integrating asexual and trans teens in her twin studies.

Peggy Orenstein, born in 1961, one year after the contraceptive pill was first commercialized, belongs to a post-sexual revolution generation. This means that although there are obvious differences between the 21st century young sexuality she describes and that of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s youth the differences are smaller than with the pre-pill generations. The main difference, obviously, has to do with the emergence of the internet, made accessible in most homes between the early and the mid-1990s, and of the smartphone, popularized already in the 2000s. Computers and smartphones made online porn generally accessible to boys, which is certainly a key factor. Next came the social media and texting apps: MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Whatsapp (2009), Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011) and so on. If the

internet made porn accessible, the social media and the texting apps have put in the hands of teenagers an extremely dangerous tool to make or destroy sexual reputations, as many know. The dating apps, such as Grindr (2009) or Tinder (2012), though satisfactory for many of its users have given the hot body a centrality it should not have in general human sexuality.

I have read *Girls and Sex* after reading *Boys and Sex*, and I find that the discourse is very similar in both books, though in *Girls* the boys are presented with little nuance as almost faceless sexual companions, and in *Boys*, logically, there is much more detail about who they are. It is not an easy book to read because the portrait that emerges from the average US high school and college boy is very far from flattering. In the case of the girls Orenstein is worried by the distance between the feminist personalities of the girls and their acceptance of sexual practices which are not really satisfactory for them. In the case of the boys feminist Orenstein struggles to combine lessons in respect with the reality of the rape culture rampant in colleges, especially in Greek life (i.e. frat life, in reference to the Greek initials by which fraternities and sororities call themselves). In fact, the most painful sections of the book deal with the efforts made by some young men to understand that pushing your girlfriend down to give you a blow job is part of that rape culture: that push on the shoulders is already robbing the girl of her capacity to give consent.

As many researchers have been explaining in recent years, boys now start watching porn at an age before they have had any sexual feelings of their own which they can identify as such, sometimes as young as seven or eight. They get the wrong impression that the heavily staged sex they see on screen faithfully represents actual sexuality. This has a negative impact on girls, not only because they can find themselves disrespected and abused as often female porn stars are, but also because boys expect from them sexual favours which the girls might not be ready to perform and that, most often, are not reciprocated. Blow jobs, Orenstein insists, are now as common as kissing and a practice far more habitual than intercourse with penetration because, pay attention!, somehow blow jobs are not considered to be intimate and teens prefer impersonal hook-ups. Blow jobs, then, are just an indication that the girl is sexually active and of interest to boys. The problem is that, Orenstein explains, few boys are willing to reciprocate with cunnilingus, candidly declaring that it grosses them out and apparently believing that some clumsy vaginal fingering will do. Whether with or without intercourse boys are mostly satisfied with the sex they get but girls report many hook-ups with no orgasms. Why do they keep on accepting bad sex, Orenstein asks them? The girls reply that they don't want to seem prudish (in my time the preferred slur was 'frigid') nor disappoint the boys. The additional problem, Orenstein explains, is that boys are asking for more and more… Because of the porn they see boys are demanding anal sex from girlfriends more than ever to the point that the current marker to establish whether a girl 'does or does not do it' is her acceptance of this practice, which is for most women painful and unrewarding. Many girls, though, oblige.

The scenario Orenstein presents is one in which dating that leads to intimacy has been pushed aside to make room for hook-up culture and in which romantic relationships have been delayed to a more adult post-college age. It is important not to 'catch feelings' and to perform sex as a sort of sport, with no attachments, which probably explains, I would add, why platonic friendship between men and women has grown. The young are mostly keeping the personal intimacy of friendship and the sexual prowess of the hook-up separate until a later age, when the 'one' (or 'ones') may appear after a period of experimentation. It wouldn't sound bad if it weren't because of some factors: the persistence of the double standard, the unequal sexualization of boys and girls, the use of the social media for bragging and for shaming, and the pervasive presence of alcohol in hook-up culture. And the matter of consent.

I believe that, on the whole, Orenstein makes too much of hook-up culture and too little of the young persons who follow other paths, either because they eschew sex altogether or because they manage their relationships in more intimate, romantic ways. I'll suppose, however, for the sake of argumentation, that the pattern which Orenstein describes is common to, say, three quarters of young people, leaving the other quarter for the less susceptible to peer pressure. According to her, sex does not happen in US colleges without heavy drinking because sober sex is too serious, and might involve icky, uncool feelings. Casual sex, then, from kissing to anal sex, starts in parties, which boys attend in their daytime clothes and girls dressed up in mini-skirts, tank tops, high heels, their faces obligatorily made up to look sexy. The Dutch courage which drinking gives boys and girls lowers inhibitions but, as we all know, it also lowers the ability to ask for and give consent, hence the countless cases of boys accused of rape who claim they had no idea they were forcing the girl. Orenstein writes that we need to make sure girls enjoy alcohol with no risk to their physical integrity but I myself fail to understand why alcohol is so essential for both boys and girls to express their sexuality. If naturally induced sexual chemistry does not happen, why force it by drinking? The result can only be bad sex for both and, always, a greater risk for the girl of being raped. To her credit, though, Orenstein also describes the opposite situation: one in which boys incapacitated by alcohol to say no are abused by girls who wrongly assume that all guys are into sex all the time.

The double standard also continues unabated and made even worse by the social media and the texting apps. Girls, Orenstein explains, need to strike an almost impossible balance between being a prude and being a slut, whereas boys need not worry except by whether their score card is full enough. This matter of numbers is mind-boggling and a question that can hardly be solved for good, for there is no fixed perception about when a person is too promiscuous or not promiscuous enough. According to Orenstein, most teens lie about how much sex they have, pretending they have more than they do, and assume that the others have plenty. The figures she gives are rather modest in view of the apparently widespread hook-up culture but what really matters is the perception of the group to which the teen in question belongs. Some girls might be slut-shamed for a number of encounters others might consider low, some boy Don Juans might be bottom of the list in different places. It's all relative. What is not relative it how reputation can be ruined to the point of suicide by the nonchalant (or malicious) sharing of sexting and videos, and the use of social media to send detailed reports of the sexual encounters. Even this is subjected to a double standard: girls' behaviour in bed tends to be openly discussed by uncaring boys but, from what I gather, the girls do not use so frequently the same tools to discuss boys' deficient performances, hardly ever shaming them as poor lovers or even rapists depending on the case.

All this amounts to something very simple: whereas now is the time for young persons to be enjoying sex with more freedom and pleasure than ever the reality reported by Orenstein and others is quite different. The mixture of porn, alcohol, social media reputation, and hook-up culture has resulted in a sexuality that seems at points a compulsory chore for both boys and girls rather than something genuinely celebrated. As an older person I should be feeling envy but after reading Orenstein I feel both relief and anxiety. I'm glad I am not a teenager today and I worry about what the teens in my family are finding in their love/sex lives. I think I am most dismayed by the idea that for both boys and girls, but above all for the girls, *looking* sexy (for the others) is so disconnected from *feeling* sexy (for yourself).

Orenstein portrays boys as persons who mostly truly accept gender equality but who are much confused about what respect and consent mean in a sexual relationship. She also presents them as much more likely to bow down to peer pressure and do terrible things in groups that they would never do individually. Of course, she refers to

the USA and within it to specific lifestyles and possibly other cultures are very different. To be honest, I don't know what is going on with teens here in Spain. Orenstein names the Dutch as the most advanced culture when it comes to teen sex, thanks to the good communication between parents and children. That is an important factor indeed but in the end, the impression I get is that if guys worried less about how they are judged by their male peers and rejected peer pressure against showing their feelings, sex would be much, much better for them and, above all, for the girls. I don't know how they can be taught to change though listening to them, as Orenstein does, seems a good way.

More on gender today, this time inspired by my reading of two extremely different volumes: Núria Gómez Gabriel and Estela Ortiz's *Love Me, Tinder: Una Mirada Crítica a lo que Ellos Ofrecen* (2020) and Antonio Bolinche's *El Síndrome de las Supermujeres* (2020). Gómez Gabriel and Ortiz dissect with verve but rather superficially men's written self-presentations on Tinder (not the photos) to categorize them under a series of labels (the romantic, the alpha male, the pick-up artist and so on). Their essays on each label are accompanied by a selection of, apparently, truthful quotations corresponding to men's self-presentation on Tinder Spain. I don't know if their 'critical look' missed the interesting guys but I must say that I was simply appalled by the very bad writing the men use to make themselves attractive to women. Out of I don't know how many dozen bios I was only interested in a guy who showed a little bit of wit. The rest varied between the awfully corny and the sexist offensive. I noticed, incidentally, that none described himself as a man but as a boy, though I am aware that 'chico' is being used in Spanish to mean a man up to 50. I must clarify that I am not a Tinder user and, after reading this book, I'm really glad I need not use a dating app. Not just because of the men (I found the volume very much in need of a critical companion volume about the women) but because how poorly I would fit its relentless culture.

The other volume, by psychologist Antonio Bolinches, felt much closer to my own life experience and that of many career women. Bolinches, who specialises in couple therapy and, generally, in treating individuals in need of counselling for their love life, develops in this book on the basis of his extensive clinical practice a thesis that every career woman knows out of experience. It is obvious, he writes, that whereas women have changed very much in the way they approach their biography, wishing to make the most of the opportunities life presents, heterosexual men have not substantially changed. Faced with the new romantic discourse brought about by feminism some have reacted by adapting well, others are navigating women's new demands as well as they can, and a minority is in regression maintaining sexist positions with no future.

The problem, Bolinche argues, is that the number of men who have adequately adapted is far inferior to that of the men who are still disoriented or plainly angry and lost. And since the number of women who have pulled themselves up by their feminist bootstraps is quite big, there are simply not enough suitably adjusted men for all. This means that, inevitably, many 'superwomen,' that is to say, women who are attractive, intelligent, sensitive and in good jobs are failing to attract any men, or are only attracting men they cannot really like, much less love. Don't we all know this… We all have women friends whom we would gladly marry were we lesbians but that can attract no man or only attract men who don't really deserve them. I don't know, in contrast, of any minimally appealing man who remains partnerless.

It is, in any case, quite interesting to see these ideas explored by a man who is very critical of current heterosexual masculinity. Bolinches has repeatedly insisted, for instance, that there is a serious problem with men's lack of maturity (he has published a book called *Peter Pan Can Grow*), which according to him lags about ten years behind women's. He blames the castrating superwomen, a tiny subset of the superwoman category, for being too impatient, noting that this impatience is a sign of immaturity that actually makes them underserving of the title superwoman. Yet, on the whole, he is quite clear that the problem is not caused by the superwomen. Simply, men are not up to the task of meeting the superwomen's demands because they are not even trying. This is unsurprising. As Bolinche knows and every feminist knows, there are always women willing enough to accept men without making firm demands about gender equality in their relationships. Not every woman can be a superwoman of the type Bolinches describes but we can all be feminists (i.e. a defender of gender equality) and as long as some women fail to defend our collective rights men will feel no need to change. Read *Love Me, Tinder* to see the proof.

Allow me to quote an interesting passage from Bolinche's book (my translation) that sums up the argumentation I am discussing but with the addition of a much relevant twist: "Admirable men have many chances to meet women who want to be with them, whereas admirable women see their chances of finding a suitable partner diminished for two reasons. The first one is that the more admirable they are the harder it is for them to admire a man. The second is that the number of admirable men willing to be with them is lower to the number of admirable women" (27). Speaking of admiration in romantic relationships is not habitual and I would like to stop here for a while. Bolinches derives from his female patients the idea that women need to feel admiration for the man they love but I don't think this is a generalised feeling. I don't see how love can prosper without genuinely liking your partner, which usually means you respect them. Admiration is a key factor only exceptionally, I think, even though I would agree that admirable men may elicit love more easily than the less admirable kind. The typical figure of the adoring wife (the great woman behind the great man) corresponds to that situation, though these days we have less and less sympathy for her.

There comes a moment in the life of the superwomen when they realize that they are as admirable as the admirable men they see around them, in their work and social circles. From that realization, there arises the very wrong impression that just as men are loved by women who admire them, they will also be loved by men who admire them. There are, however, very few men of that type for all men have been taught that they deserve a woman's admiration and just a handful know how to admire without feeling diminished as men. For a wonderful example of the man who admires let me name Martin Ginsburg, the husband of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I am sure that there are (many?) others but, in general, as Bolinche notes, though superwomen may be admired from afar very few men will step forward to admire them in the intimacy of the couple just like so many adoring women admire their men. Every woman academic, to cite the example closest to my own experience, finds out eventually that there are no academic husbands as there used to be academic wives. Men can be perfectly supportive of a woman's career but they are rarely devoted admirers, though, of course, there must be exceptions.

Bolinches has no real solution for the superwomen who find no admirers (I have just realized that 'admirer' used to be a synonym for suitor). Here we are in a territory very far from what dating apps like Tinder can offer, for which admiration is a truly alien concept. In the social media you may expect likes but with everyone expecting to collect them, there is very little room for true admiration (and I mean personal, not the impersonal admiration for a remote celebrity). The superwomen Bolinches discusses are not after casual sex or instant hook-ups that can only generate admiration for particular sexual

skills, but after love in the sense of lasting companionship. Unable to radically alter men, Bolinches basically says that unhappy superwomen should learn to be as happy with themselves as possible for, as we all know, well-balanced individuals are more attractive than needy ones. The problem with this recipe, which I do subscribe, is that a well-balanced woman tends not to need a man in her life—but perhaps that is the whole point and Tinder can do very well for the occasional fling.

The admirable men, to sum up, are too narcissistic to admire the superwomen they should admire back and prefer the company of adoring partners who are not superwomen. The solution, you might say, lies in behaving like men: be also narcissistic, expect a partner to be adoring rather than admirable. English novelist Fay Weldon used to say that women should learn to do as men do: choose partners of a lower standard and raise them to their level. The problem with her view is that I don't quite see it working. Bolinches tells the story of a female CEO who needed counselling because she felt attracted to her chauffeur. According to him, she managed to establish a satisfactory relationship with her employee but this is hard for me to believe. A male boss might be happy marrying his personal assistant but I just don't see a female boss marrying her chaffeur—unless he starts the relationship on the basis of feeling genuine admiration for her. Would that last? I'm not sure…

Bolinches, then, is right to note that admiration does play an important role in the love life of the female achievers he calls superwomen and I would add that, generally speaking, women admire men today less than ever. Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle". Take the mirror away, she writes, and "man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine". Woolf was partly deluded, I think, in believing that if woman's admiration was lost men would be lost, for it seems to be that they prefer, on the whole, men's admiration. It might well be that soon not even admirable men find adoring partners, for we live in times in which few male icons are still standing. Perhaps the inevitable conclusion is that we can hardly expect men to admire any superwomen when men themselves are no longer so deeply admired. Mutual admiration might appear to be the desirable goal but it seems to me that Woolf's mirror is broken and the other one has not even been built (though exceptional men like Leonard Woolf, Virginia's husband, are quite capable of holding it). In fact, we women have managed to progress without it and I wonder whether it is needed at all.

Bolinche remains puzzled by the paradox he himself describes: the more women improve, the worse they are punished with a lack of suitable partners; the more successful a man is, the more he is rewarded with an abundance of adoring women. Ergo: men may admire successful women at a distance but feel too threatened by them to be their loving partners. Nothing surprising here, except Boliche's candid approach to the matter. Perhaps, just perhaps, things have moved forward too fast (though they seem to progress so slowly) for men to adapt. I am sure that the more recalcitrant men think that women's advances are reward enough, feeling that admiration is going too far. Perhaps, just perhaps, admiration has nothing to do with love though we know that it is always part of it, not necessarily admiration for personal achievements but for personal qualities. Since women used to be trained to admire men, maybe we can train men to admire us—until one day the admiration can be mutual.

5 October 2020 / NEW BOOK!: *REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN LITERATURE AND FILM - FOCUS ON MEN*

Last March I published the post <u>"How Entitlement and Villainy Connect"</u> to publicise my first monograph in English *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort* (Routledge, 2019). Now is the turn to launch my second book in English, *<u>Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men</u>*. Both are part of my research in Masculinities Studies and, as such, are necessarily similar. Yet, at the same time they are very different examples of how academic research is done. I think that is worth some comment.

Every mature scholar accumulates a long list of articles published in journals along the years and there comes a time when it makes sense to see how they can be put together as a book. I believed that time had come two years ago, when I first submitted a proposal for the book now published. It is the habitual convention not to reprint chapters of books in other books (or only exceptionally) but is not uncommon to collect together journal articles. Or that is what I had assumed. I have read many books of this type but something seems to have changed because by the time I put my collection together I was told that this type of book was no longer interesting. The editor of the first book series to which I submitted the proposal was even rude to me about this: "why would anyone want to publish work available elsewhere?" he told me in a rather cold email message, which truly surprised (and hurt) me. I attribute this to his being a sociologist used to scientific publication which, certainly, is hardly ever published in collections (unlike what is more habitual in the Humanities). The second commissioning editor I approached was far more welcoming but told me that she'd rather publish new research by me. This is how I finally published *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort* a book, which as I explained in my previous post, had been since 2008 in the making.

The very week that Routledge published my book, a commissioning editor from Cambridge Scholars Publishing sent me an e-mail message asking whether I knew of any project that they might publish. I had edited for them the collective volumes *Recycling Culture(s)* (2008) and *Persistence and Resistance in English Studies: New Research* (co-edited with David Owen and Elisabet Pladevall). These gather together papers presented at two conferences celebrated at my university, UAB, expanded for book publication. My experience with CSP had been good and it occurred to me then that they might welcome my collection. So they did, and here's the book, of which I am immensely satisfied. A matter that makes this book very special to me as that I chose for the cover a beautiful selfie that my nephew Álex took a while ago (for a class project in which students were asked to produce a self-portrait). I had originally called the book *Focus on Men: Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film*, but, as happened in the case of the Routledge book, I was asked to reverse the order of title and subtitle (apparently libraries prefer the more self-explanatory titles). The photo, which shows Alex holding his glasses in his hand, ready to focus on his future whenever he chooses, illustrates very well my 'focus on men' concept, and there it is. It's very beautiful and it makes me very proud to have it on the cover of my book.

I must clarify that *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men* consists of six previously published articles and six new chapters (some had been online as working papers for a while, some are new). Here are the contents:

Introduction: Why We Should Focus on Men vii
Chapter One. Queerying Antonio: Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and the
    Problem of Heterosexism 1

I must say that it was not easy at all to come up with this final list, which is limited, as I say, to what I have published in journals (at any rate relatively little in comparison to what I have published in collective books). The other matter that worried me very much was how to place the articles, written in very different periods and circumstances, in a way that made sense. The other book, *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort*, is a monograph designed from scratch to cohere as much as possible. Yet in this one I had an immense variety of articles, from Shakespeare to Richard K. Morgan. I decided that perhaps that was the key: look at the chronology of the texts analysed and try to organise the volume this way. Of course, I have deviated from my own rule because the three chapters dealing with Dickens come after a chapter on Victorian *Wuthering Heights* but deal with 21st century texts. I wanted to build a nice gradation so that the reader would be taken gently from the 16th to the 21st century, from Elizabethan drama to post-cyberpunk. I hope it works… Of course, the articles were not written in this orderly fashion. The oldest one, the chapter dealing with Hareton in Emily Brontë's masterpiece, originates in the lecture I gave back in 2001 in my official examination to get tenure, whereas the most recent piece happens to be the chapter on Asimov's amazingly attractive robot R. Daneel Olivaw, which I wrote in 2019. It is, in any case, a real pleasure, to see together work that has a similar intellectual origin but that was until now scattered in very many different places (or that had been rejected in some cases by unsympathetic peer reviewers and, yes, I mean the chapter on Sirius Black, which with six rejections is my own personal record).

I must express here my absolute frustration with how the demands of our academic tasks prevent us from concentrating on writing books. I truly believe that both monographs and collections should be our main focus in publishing and not articles and chapters in collective books. Do not misunderstand me: shorter pieces are important and, as I am arguing, it makes good sense to collect them now and then in books. What I do not accept, and protest against, is the fact that books count so little for research assessment (at least in Spain). When I apply to be assessed in 2023, my next deadline,

the Routledge book will only count as one of the five publications I need to inform about, even though it is 110,000 pages long and has nine chapters which equal nine articles. The idea that a book counts the same as a 5000 word article is simply ludicrous but these are the rules which assessment agency ANECA follows, inspired by the scientific fixation with the paper. I will not include my CSP book among my most valuable publications, not because I think it is not representative of what I do as a researcher (quite the opposite) but because ANECA will most likely argue that it is research corresponding to an earlier period. Actually, I will include one of the articles reprinted as a book chapter but referencing its original publication in a journal. This lack of enticement to publish monographs is, I think, a serious error for it is in monographs where we express our most sustained intellectual efforts. Articles and book chapters are fine but they are short bursts of energy in comparison to writing a monograph, which is steady, focused intellectual work (what we learn to do in doctoral dissertations).

The other matter that needs to be born in mind, apart from ANECA's criteria, is time. I have managed to publish the monograph and the collection in about two years because my university scrupulously respects the legality marked by the decree known as 'Decreto Wert' of 2011. According to this decree, researchers with at least three six-year periods of research validated by the Ministerio can be allowed to teach 16 ECTS instead of the habitual 24 ECTS. I have been in this privileged situation for the last five years (if I recall correctly), which explains my productivity. The monograph was written in a period of one year during which I had no teaching duties. The collection has been assembled during Covid-19 lockdown, which has certainly facilitated matters to me not because I had less teaching to do but because I had no long commute to take my energy away. Now that I'm back to teaching face-to-face I have no time or energy to start a new book, even though title, chapter list and bibliography are ready and waiting.

Back to *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men*, I'm quoting my own text in CSP's website to note that collectively, these essays argue that, although much has been written about men, it has been done from a perspective that does not see masculinity as a specific feature in need of critical appraisal. Men need to be made aware of how they are represented in order to alter the toxic patriarchal models handed down to them and even break the extant binary gender models. For that, it is important that men distinguish patriarchy from masculinity, as is done here, and form anti-patriarchal alliances with each other and with women. This book is, then, an invitation to men's liberation from patriarchy by raising an awareness of its crippling constraints. This begins, I add, by showing men how they are represented (mostly how they self-represent) in order to see where the positive models and the negative failures are. I find that, on the whole, men's fictional representation is far less flattering than feminist criticism, focused on women's deficient representation by men, usually assumes. The flaws are there for all to see, if you care to look, whereas the positive models are few and far between. A matter that puzzles me very much is that whenever positive models emerge they are not human (Asimov's Daneel), are destroyed by their authors (Sirius Black and others), or prevented from bringing on deep changes. This is because, I believe, men have no collective agenda to improve their self-representation as, unlike women, they do not see themselves as a class (or so-called 'minority') but as a constellation of individuals. Please, recall that I always distinguish between men and patriarchy and that I would like to see men becoming collectively aware of the way in which they can be anti-patriarchal. I have found in the texts analysed some anti-patriarchal attitudes but not a sense that this is an actual position that can be actively assumed by a majority of men. Enjoy!!!

My good friend Brian Baker (@SciFiBaker) tweeted yesterday: "Hands up who's tried, through classroom technology failures and 'dual mode delivery,' to teach online students down your phone at the same time as trying to organise discussion with other students in the classroom? Next time I'll take a unicycle with me as well". And do handstands… Fortunately for me, my school is too poor to have installed cameras in the classrooms and I have been spared the pleasures of 'dual mode delivery.' I know, however, of colleagues here and in other universities who are using their personal laptops or cell phones and have equipped themselves with mikes to teach in this way. Without technology to stream my classes, which I do not want anyway, I have chosen to improvise what to do online with the fifty percent of my class that cannot attend face-to-face teaching on alternate Thursdays. So far I have used narrated PowerPoints and asked them to read my own academic articles; I am now about to record a series of podcasts and go on thinking of other resources.

Complaining about the new teaching conditions caused by the Covid-19 crisis may sound unprofessional but I think it would be simply counterproductive to pretend that teaching goes on as usual with no glitches. That is not the case at all. From what I see in my own school one important matter is that, as I have already commented on here, there is a poor understanding of what online teaching means in one particular regard: the obsession with synchronous teaching. One of my colleagues has permission to teach online for justified health reasons and what he did was to record a couple of lectures for the first week of his course which he uploaded onto his Virtual Campus classroom. The school authorities upbraided him because, according to them, he needs to respect the schedule whether he teaches face-to-face or online. Since the school has not booked a classroom for his students, and most of them are in the building attending lectures, this means that they must follow his synchronous online teaching wherever they can. With all classrooms now fully occupied since the arrival of our new 1150 first-year students and no alternative spaces available anywhere (except for just a handful of students) this means that whole classes taught online synchronously are having a very hard time trying to follow lectures. Some, we have been told by the students' delegates, are doing so in their cars. I may see the need for synchronous online teaching when student participation is essential but when it is not this is an added difficulty that helps no one.

Another matter is how actual classroom teaching is being implemented. I don't really know where to begin… Right, I'll begin with the windows. We have been asked to ventilate the classroom ten minutes between sessions, which is not working well at all because students have no place to wait in the meantime. The main hall is spacious but soon crowded, and so are the corridors (I haven't been to the cafeteria yet…). The result? Students get in the classrooms as soon as the previous group vacates them. I don't know what the other teachers are doing but I'm not very good myself at waiting. With one thing and the other I'm wasting a lot of precious time. Also, I'm so nervous about the whole situation that I think I have only signed up for attendance twice out of eight teaching days. We have been asked to keep the windows open for the duration of the lectures, which can still be done since this is a mild October month (and this is Spain, not Sweden…) but this has already caused students in early morning classes to complain that they are cold. In one of my classrooms the draught caused by keeping windows and door open is so strong that my notes started flying off the table. I am closing the door now but with some misgivings as the space is rather small.

Students, by the way, do not appreciate at all being taught in large groups of 50 or 100 with just one metre distance between them, they simply do not feel safe. I have

already mentioned the crowded corridors, which our students are indignantly reporting on a daily basis on their social media. Add to this that some spaces occupied to accommodate teaching are not really suitable to be used regularly. My bigger classroom is, as happens, the 'Sala de Grados,' that is to say the formally furnished classroom where doctoral students present their dissertations and teachers are examined for tenure (this brings some memories…). This means that this room has very comfy seats but no tables for students to take notes. I won't even mention the ugly artwork that distracts me so much, above all the ghostly image of man possibly supposed to be an alien staring at me from the back wall. Ugh!

Then there's the problem of the facemasks. We, UAB teachers, were allowed for the first three weeks to teach with no masks on but this period of leniency is over and now we all have to wear them. This is a decision which makes perfect sense on health grounds but that is disastrous for teaching. Our colleagues in the Speech Therapy section of the School of Psychology had sent us a cheerful [report] in early September basically arguing that the facemasks are no hindrance for good teaching, as they are no obstacle to project our voices and be adequately heard. They reminded us of the need to keep our vocal chords hydrated and not to strain them by trying to speak in a louder voice. This is the reason, let me tell you, why primary and secondary school teachers who need to speak to their classes for many hours every day have in many cases temporarily lost their voices. So, sorry but the facemasks do have an obvious negative effect: not only are they a nuisance, it does really feel as if you cannot be heard well, regardless of what the scientific evidence proves about oxygen intake and sound projection. The physical effects, on the other hand, are not imaginary at all: mouth dryness increases palpably and the discomfort is noticeable (and the smell, right?); the masks were made for protection in medical environments not to cover the mouths of people speaking to large audiences, much less in big spaces for, say, three or four hours.

The facemasks have a far worse poisonous effect on teaching: they prevent teacher-student communication. My cheerful colleagues in Speech Therapy note that facemasks "diminish non-verbal communication and, therefore, bidirectionally, certain feedback from students. This needs to be considered and adapt teacher's attention to communicative aspects such as the reception of the habitual and necessary feedback". In my own teaching practice these four weeks, what this means is that I can speak (with some difficulties) with my 13 masters' degree students in our smallish classroom (about 40m2) but there is no way I can communicate with my 45 students in my bigger classroom (roughly 120m2). I have tried but their words come out absolutely muffled (most of them use cloth facemasks, not surgical ones) and I simply don't understand them. The students in the MA class are physically closer to me and I can more or less follow them, but I have also noticed that the cloth masks need to be held with the fingers, otherwise they tend to slip off. Needless to say, students wear washable cloth masks because they are cheaper than surgical masks that must be replaced every four hours. All this means that those who claim that facemasks are no obstacle to teaching are thinking of lectures in which only the teacher speaks and the students make notes in silence. With the facemasks on any kind of interaction is next to impossible, except in smaller spaces where seminar-style teaching may happen. In a couple of weeks I need my students in the bigger group to do class presentations and I really don't see how this is going to work. And, please, do not misunderstand me: I'm not arguing here that we should take our masks off at all, I'm saying that they are a major obstacle in a higher education face-to-face context.

The other toxic effect of facemasks is the anonymity they bring to teaching. With my facemask on, I feel like a robot. I try to give my voice all the expression I usually communicate facially (I teach Literature, remember?) but this is very limited. My students cannot see me smile (a piece in *The Conversation* actually claimed that we are smiling

less because it is no use…) or in any way make the many funny faces I use when reading from the literary texts we analyse, and just as part of my teaching style… I miss that very much! Besides, what I see in front of me is a totally anonymous audience of persons I might never recognize without their masks on. In the case of my MA class I have already taken a look at their photos with no masks on for even though I have already learned their names I don't know what they look like. In the case of my Victorian Literature class, I'm waiting to receive the first exercises to do the same and start connecting names to… eyes, which is the part of their faces I must focus on. I must say that these students are very kind to me, showing as expressively as they can with their eyes that they are following my teaching, for which I thank them.

I'll grant, then, that my teaching this semester could be certainly improved but my feeling is that I have lost control over my habitual teaching strategies. I hate lecturing with no dialogue and I feel that this is what I am forced to accept doing. Since we have 'survived' four weeks in this way and it seems that we might continue face-to-face the rest of the semester the question that arises is whether this is not, after all, what the Government has called the 'new normality.' Aren't we generally doing well and carrying on business as usual? I think that it is business as usual for the traditional lecturer used to transmitting information without expecting students' feedback. For those of us in the Literature classroom that understand teaching as working with the students on textual analysis in constant interaction this is working very poorly. I have insisted and I insist that I would be far more comfortable and effective working asynchronously (and occasionally synchronously) online and properly interacting with my students via forums, etc.

A colleague told me today that, most likely, the university authorities all over the world that decreed the implementation of hybrid teaching did not expect this situation to last. By now, we should be all working from home again. It is fortunate, of course, that we are healthy enough to move about and be at our universities at all but a) we are certainly assuming a risk by travelling to our centres and staying there in crowded spaces; b) the current practices are going to diminish the quality of our teaching in most if not all cases. I am well aware that I am in the minority and that most teachers prefer face-to-face teaching but I still demand my own right to go online (and I mean in a flexible asynchronous way). I do want to guarantee the quality of my teaching and I cannot do that in my current working conditions. I simply fail to understand what the compulsory face-to-face teaching is proving, considering that we are in the middle of a dangerous pandemic, and why all the issues I have raised have so little weight. In any case, I will certainly try to do my best, be as professional as I usually am.

PS Guess what? Face-to-face teaching has been suspended by the regional health authorities for two weeks…

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19 October 2020 / FEAR OF ONLINE TEACHING: WHAT SEEMS TO BE AT STAKE

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You will have to excuse me but I need to vent my frustration about the fact that despite the call of the regional Catalan authorities to move face-to-face teaching online, my university has decided to make an exception with the MA degrees. This means that in practice many of us will have to travel to UAB to teach on the same day a virtual BA class and a face-to-face MA class. Why and what for is something that most of my colleagues in the MA and myself fail to understand. If there is an emergency by which we have been recommended to work from home and this can be done, why do we need to take a long commute to UAB and put at risk our health and that of our MA students? It's just a matter of two weeks, not until the end of the semester!

The explanation we have been given (that the Generalitat's instructions were suggestions and not orders to be implemented according to the news of each university) sounds hollow. The instructions did make a difference between practical teaching that might require the use of labs or similar equipment (these may go on face-to-face) and theoretical teaching, which, the regional Government said, should be suspended if possible. Since it is certainly possible to do so, the decision of the my school's authorities to send us back to class defies all logic. Not only this: it comes when MA classes had been already moved online for a couple of days, which sends students the message that all we do is improvised. Hence my mighty annoyance: like many colleagues, I spent a good deal of last Wednesday reorganizing matters only to be told on Thursday that we'd be returning to face-to-face teaching on Monday. Well, thanks.

One of my colleagues in the MA, as frustrated as I am, spoke of an incomprehensible obsession with face-to-face teaching. I agree. Last semester we had to go online with no other option because of the harsh lockdown but now that we can supposedly choose (blame the Generalitat for their ambiguous instructions) the university authorities are defending face-to-face teaching with an insistence that bespeaks something else. The case is not as suspicious or as extreme as what is happening in Britain where, according to *The Guardian*, teachers are forced to work in less than healthy circumstances because the universities fear that with online teaching students might drop before Christmas and would have to be returned a big chunk of the hefty [fees](). UAB is a public university charging students just a fraction of the £9000 which an academic course may cost in Britain (in England, specifically) but I cannot help seeing the exception made with the MAs as, perhaps, an economic matter. MA students pay between 2500 and 6500 euros for an MA depending on their country of origin and I very much suspect that this is a factor considered by the authorities. A displeased MA student is bad publicity for UAB in ways that a displeased BA student is not. Of course, this may backfire: a scared MA student who feels that it is unsafe to teach face-to-face can certainly be a major source of negative publicity.

The actual number of contagions in my university is hard to assess because there are no official figures. Informally, I have been told that it is as low as nine. As far as I know, there is not a worrying situation either in the classroom or in the residences but, then, I cannot claim to be well informed. I don't think we are in the same situation as our British colleagues teaching in universities with hundreds of infected students locked up in their halls of residence but we are a campus university daily receiving students from a quite big geographical area. Some of my colleagues take long commutes of 100 kms and above. This means that UAB's capacity to spread Covid-19 is considerable and this is why the decision to move BA theoretical teaching online (for two weeks, let me stress) makes perfect sense. It is not a matter of being up to our necks in Covid-19 but a matter of our daily risking the spread of the virus by recklessly having people in a 100km radius commute to UAB. I have it made very clear on my side that we should never have started face-to-face teaching for that very same reason.

I don't want to insist on the inconvenience of face-to-face teaching which I already described last week but I want to insist on the matter of how poorly online teaching is understood. What most universities all over the world are doing is not online teaching: it's face-to-face teaching using online tools. This consists of streaming lectures and of setting up seminars as it would be done in face-to-face teaching but using programmes such as Teams, Collaborate and others. No wonder teachers and students mostly hate it! Classroom interaction is impoverished, as we know, in a situation in which students can switch off cameras and sound, and in which, as one of my colleagues said, it mostly feels as if you're talking to the wall. It is awkward, it is boring, it is depressing… and it depends on the vagaries of computer equipment and the availability of quality streaming. Add to this that most universities have simply transferred their face-to-face teaching

schedules online, as my own university has done, which means that one of the most attractive features of true online teaching is lost: its flexibility. All this, I'll stress, is NOT online teaching—this is very traditional teaching done in an untraditional online classroom, nothing else.

Real online teaching, as I know from sixteen years teaching at the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, is task-based, not scheduled-based. That is to say: you give your students the materials they need for independent study (which may include of course recorded lectures, podcasts, narrated PowerPoints, etc) and you set them tasks with a deadline. This is something both styles of teaching share: assessment in face-to-face teaching is also based on tasks, including exams, papers, and other types of exercises. The difference is that, at least in my experience at UOC, it was assumed that teachers and students need not meet 3 hours a week, as we do at UAB, for 18 weeks each semester. The assessment of my teaching workload was done on the basis of how many students I was in charge of, which might or might not be fair as pay depended on that. At UAB my workload is calculated on the basis of how many hour I teach face-to-face and how many students I am responsible for. Yet, and here is where I am going, who says that three weekly contact hours are ideal for all kind of courses and in all circumstances? And if we realize that classroom contact can be replaced with other strategies that might work better, in combination or not, shouldn't we rethink the whole teaching model?

I believe that the obsession with face-to-face teaching has to do precisely with this: with the fear that, as many others have already noted since the Covid-19 crisis started, the enormous expense of maintaining a campus, of sending children to study away from home, might not be absolutely necessary. If much more can be done online (but well done, not as we do it), then we need to question why we meet in the classroom at all. This week, for instance, I've had a very pleasing communication online with a student whose voice I had never heard in class because of the current situation in which, remember, facemasks make dialogue almost impossible in big groups. In fact, students are far more expressive online (in forums I mean) than they are in the classroom, where conversation flows with great difficulty even without the masks. I don't know at this point, then, whether the three weekly hours are truly for their benefit or part of the university's traditionally conservative modus operandi. If we discover that we can teach as well, if not better, with more online contact and less face-to-face contact this would not make us worse teachers. If would make us better. I read somewhere that if lecturers record their courses and put them online, there would be no need for them to teach face-to-face every year, which means that there would be less need to hire lecturers… I am certainly not defending that dystopian scenario which, anyway, seems to forget a) that lectures are just one part of teaching and b) someone would still have to mark exercises. What I mean is that Covid-19 should be an occasion to rethink what we do, not to panic and retrench into traditional ways of teaching, streaming or no streaming.

Of course, we need to bear in mind as well students' resistance to new methods and other problems. One of my BA students complained that online teaching means that students must have access to good bandwidth, reliable computer equipment and a room of their own. I agree that this is the case but classroom activity is not the same as independent study, by which I mean that classroom contact is by no means sufficient and that students need, anyway, to study hard at home, in adequate spaces and with adequate equipment. The university may provide suitable space in libraries and wi-fi, but still we cannot equip all students with laptops and, in this time and day, they are indispensable. The digital breach is real but it is not solved by sticking to a traditional face-to-face model of teaching because, I insist, classroom contact is not enough. When students with a BA degree face the job market they will be asked to demonstrate their online skills and they cannot simply plea that lack of resources at home prevented them

from acquiring them. Please, recall that I come from a working-class background and know very well what it is like to be short of funds but part of a university education is being minimally equipped for it. Sorry if I offend anyone.

One matter that keep nagging me is that Covid-19 has caught the universities at a time when most of us are too old to adapt to the new times. The average age of university teachers is Spain is 54 (my own) and we all know cases of older teachers who had not even bothered to use virtual campus. Ask them now to change their ways! We need, in short, to listen to the younger staff for ideas. I do not mean that we need to transform teaching using social media strategies (um, not really) or intensive gamification (even worse…). But it seems to me that younger generations used to recording themselves and, well, using social media, might have a better understanding of other possibilities for learning. I, for instance, have an intense dislike of seeing me on the screen, which works very poorly with the need to stream classes. I even dislike the sound of my recorded voice… so you see what I mean.

I did think of rebelling and not teaching face-to-face as ordered but in the end I find that explaining myself here is better for my mental health and, I hope, may help others. Thanks for reading.

PS This post remained unpublished as on the same day I wrote it our MA students decided not to attend classes in the following two weeks, which made my ranting obsolete.

27 October 2020 / A GREAT DOUBLE BILL ON THE LIVES OF YOUNG GIRLS: *CUTIES* AND *EIGHTH GRADE*

You may have heard already of *Cuties* (original title *Mignonnes*), the debut feature film by French-Senegalese director Maïmouna Doucouré (b. 1985) author also of the screenplay. Her film, partly based on her own childhood experiences, narrates a turning point in the life of eleven-year-old Amy, a young girl with the same migrant ethnic background as the director. When news that her father is bringing home a second wife, as the Islamic religion permits him, and in view of her mother's resigned humiliation, Amy starts rebelling. She not only disobeys the injunctions of her stern grand-aunt, the veritable custodian of the family's patriarchal values, but also joins unbeknownst to her mother a troupe of multi-racial classmates training for a dance contest. Amy's appropriation of a cousin's smartphone introduces her to the social networks everyone her age is already using and, what's more important, teaches her the sexualized dance routines uploaded by older girls that she has her companions imitate. When they take part in the contest, spectators are far from enthusiastic about their bumping and griding and Amy understands that neither world—her family's repressive understanding of femininity, the so-called 'liberal' West's exploitation of female bodies—can offer her what she truly needs.

When this film was released on Netflix, on 9 September, it immediately caused a major uproar among the most conservative American spectators. A scene interpolated in the narrative in which the director shows the girls fooling around in their sexy dance outfits elicited accusations that this was child pornography. The dance routine the girls display at the contest was found to be unwatchable (that was the director's intention but for very different reasons). Netflix, which was simply the distributor and not the film's producer, even had to apologise for the poster showing the girls' bare midriff (remember the four friends are eleven). Since then, *USA Today* [informs](#), "at least four state attorneys general [have] asked Netflix to pull the film; Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) urged a criminal

investigation; Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) said he was unsatisfied with Netflix's apology; and a Texas grand jury indicted Netflix earlier this month for promoting 'lewd material of children'". This is part of an article claiming that the *Cuties* scandal has lost Netflix perhaps even hundreds of thousands of subscribers (in the USA) after the #CancelNetflix smear campaign connected with the film.

Many others have defended *Cuties* and the argumentation in its favour is very easy to understand: Maïmouna Doucouré wanted to denounce the sexualization of young girls at an age when they don't even have a clear understanding of their own erotic impulses (and when their bodies are not even fully developed). She explains with great precision how the process works: the girls want to be liked and for that they imitate what is most appreciated on the social networks—the self-exhibition of young, sexy female bodies. If, as the many likes show, this is a valid strategy for the older girls, it must also be valid for the younger girls, they naively assume; in the absence of any adult who can explain the crucial differences, Amy and her friends go down that path without truly grasping the nuances of what they are doing.

Please note that there is nothing sexual in the film in the sense that there are no scenes between the girls and any boys (a pathetic moment between Amy and her smartphone owning cousin is stopped by him in consternation). The girls' dance outfits are not age-appropriate, I agree with that, but they are not really different from what you can see among very young cheerleaders or what is promoted these days on Tik-Tok. In fact, let me tell you that when I first heard that there was some kind of trouble with *Cuties*, I assumed that it came from the Muslim community in France. I supposed they might have been annoyed by the presentation of Amy's resistance to her father's patriarchal choices but, as you can see, the scandal erupted in the USA.

This is ironic, to say the least, as the strategies for sexualized self-presentation that French Amy and her friends learn come from the social media invented in Silicon Valley. They come from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and similar, all of them American products routinely used by pre-teens and teenagers all over the world to poison their lives. Proof of this is the other film which I am recommending today: *Eighth Grade*, also available on Netflix. In fact, my recommendation is that you see the two films together for they constitute a splendid double bill about the lives of contemporary young girls. They might seem unrelated at first sight but you can see for yourself that both narrate a state of matters that must be extremely difficult to navigate, and I say this as a fifty-something adult woman that would not know what to do in these girls' position.

Eight Grade (2018) has been written and directed by [Bo Burnham](#) (b. 1990) an American comedian, musician, actor, filmmaker and poet, who "began his performance career as a YouTuber in March 2006" and who is quite well-known as such. This is his first film. I knew nothing about Burnham but I must say that I totally applaud his brave decision to immerse himself in the world of shy thirteen-year-old Elsie Fisher to show the rest of us what it is like to be an American teen girl today. Neither *Cuties* nor *Eight Grade* have been made for children but I think it makes perfect sense to see them with the teens in your family, if you have any, not only for them to validate what the films narrate but also to open up a much needed discussion about what girls specifically should accept or reject in their lives.

Elsie's narrative arc is very simple and very simply limited by her eighth grade in school. Most films about teenagers focus on the high school years but this one pays, exceptionally, attention to that grey area between early childhood and adolescence properly speaking. As I recently told my students it's funny how the -teen suffix conditions an understanding of adolescence in the Anglophone countries. In Spain we take it for granted that adolescence begins at 12, which is in the English language an age in the pre-teen years (supposedly starting at 10). In any case, Elsie, who lives with her divorced dad Mark (a loving, supporting man), faces difficulties that while common to any

adolescent since the term was invented 120 years ago are enhanced by the impact of social media in her age group. Having pimples, being body-conscious, making awkward moves to approach someone you like, fighting a losing battle against the most popular girls in class and so on are hardly novelties. What is new is the obsessive documentation in the social media of every single step taken, for good but mostly for bad, and the dangerous pressure this puts on all teens. Burnham has chosen a girl but it would be interesting to see a companion piece about a boy, perhaps the nerdish but also charming guy that befriends Elsie, for no teen is free of that tremendous burden.

It seems to me that all those Americans so offended with *Cuties* have missed the ways in which *Eighth Grade* is also lewd, even though these are different. There is a very uncomfortable scene in which Elsie picks a banana, a fruit she hates, to teach herself how to give a blow job, as the YouTube videos she is checking suggest. Her befuddled father catches her in the act, totally misreading the situation, and Elsie tries to eat the banana only to choke on it. This is not at all *American Pie*-style dirty humour but a comment on how pathetic it is that 13-year-old girls need to give blow jobs in order to be sexually enticing to boys their age (at least to the most coveted ones). Predictably, Elsie is interested in a popular boy that Burnham portrays with no compassion as a total jerk undeserving of her attention; the scene when she tries to awaken his interest by pretending that her private nudie pictures can be seen in her smartphone is another sad moment.

Worst of all is the terrifying encounter with a boy who, as he informs Elsie, just wants to train her into the type of sexual activity that will make her popular at parties and who is miffed when she rejects that kind of favour (though she is in tears at this point). I wonder, then, why *Eighth Grade* has not provoked and even bigger scandal than *Cuties*, though I think I know the answer. Even though there is much talk of sex in Burnham's film, Elsie cannot be said to be sexy (though she is prettier than she assumes). In contrast, even though there is hardly any talk of sex in *Cuties*, Amy and her friends do look sexy in their dance outfits. Any healthy spectator understands why this is necessary. The ones disturbed by their sexiness are, in short, the dirty-minded individuals that enjoy that sexiness too much. How do they deny this ugly truth? By calling for a witch-hunt against the female film director, accusing *her* of being dirty-minded. How sad.

A personal anecdote to finish. Elsie has a YouTube channel in which she gives advice about how to face the crises of being a teen like her. She has very few followers but it is obvious that the advice she gives is solid. Unlike her everyday shy self, Elsie appears to be confident and quite wise in her videos. The day after I saw the film, my youngest niece (eleven) messaged me to say that she wanted me to buy her a sleeve for her smartphone. Knowing that she had to negotiate this purchase, she offered to upload a video of herself on TikTok and I had to determine how many likes it should get. I accepted her offer but stipulated, thinking of Elsie, that it should be a video in which she said something clever. Ah, no, my niece replied quite cross: either a dance video or nothing; the kind of video I proposed would get no likes… In that way she deprived herself of her coveted sleeve and I learned yet another lesson about young girls and social media. See *Cuties* and *Eighth Grade* and learn their lessons.

Looking for a Victorian Literature topic suitable for an MA dissertation I came across very enthusiastic reviews in GoodReads for the novel *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) by Dinah Maria Craik (née Mulock, 1826-1887). I'm sorry to say that though I have come across occasional references to this once popular author, I had never heard about this novel. I asked my colleagues but none had read it, though one remembered having seen the 1974 BBC adaptation (the other two were made in 1915 and 1938). I downloaded the novel anyway and it turned out to be a totally engrossing rags-to-riches story about the titular character, John Halifax, narrated by his best friend, Phineas Fletcher (yes, like his ancestor, the real-life Jacobean poet). Craik made a most peculiar choice of narrator for Phineas is not only clearly in love with his friend John but also, once he marries, the third adult in his household, together with his wife Ursula. These Victorians never cease surprising me!

Phineas, 16 and the son of a Quaker tannery owner, meets orphaned working-lad John, 14, when the younger boy volunteers to take the older disabled boy home. The name of Phineas' debilitating disease is not mentioned but it is understood that is has a debilitating effect and causes regular episodes of deep pain. Later in the novel Phineas overcomes it enough to walk for himself but here he still moves about in a singular hand carriage (the novel is set between 1784 and 1825, for you to understand the medical context). During this episode Phineas is fascinated by John, whose "face had come like a flash of sunshine" because he is "a reflection of the merry boyhood, the youth and strength that never were, never could be, mine". He himself makes the connection between his sudden interest in John with the Biblical story of Jonathan and David whom the former loved "as his own soul". Indeed, once they become close friends, Phineas often uses the name of David for his friend, though towards the end of the novel he calls that impulse just a youthful folly.

In view of this candid Biblical declaration and of the many passages in which Phineas reports how pleasurable it is to be carried in John's powerful arms and how fulfilling their conversations are, I expected that there would be plenty of academic work on Craik's novel as a homoerotic text. This is not the case. I came across a very juice post by Clare Walker Gore, signing as silverforketiquette, "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name?: Queer Desire in The Mid-Victorian Novel" (2016) but, as happens, most articles and book chapters dealing with *John Halifax, Gentleman* focus on Phineas' disability and have been written from a Disabilities Studies point of view. They do focus, as Gore does, on the matter of whether Phineas' disability places him in a 'feminine' position, which defuses any implicit homoerotic association with John but not his interpretation as an openly queer character. It appears that one of the original reviewers, R.H. Hutton, observed in his review "Novels by the Authoress of *John Halifax*" (*North British Review* 29, 1858, 253-262) that "it is hard to suppress the fear that Phineas Fletcher will fall hopelessly in love with John Halifax, so hard is it to remember that Phineas is of the male sex". But this is disingenuous for despite his disability and his assumption of a necessary celibacy because no woman would marry him (he thinks) Phineas is not feminine or asexual but a queer man. The original Victorian readers seems to have been satisfied that as long as there is no chance of sex between the two men, their friendship is perfectly acceptable and so are Phineas' frequent references to their mutual love and, above all, their mutual caring for each other.

Craik's novel has often been read as a paean to the 'captains of industry' in Carlyle's famous phrase but, actually, John just gets lucky several times in this tale of social mobility. First, he just happens to be near Phineas when his services are needed

and, most crucially, his wife Ursula is a gentlewoman and an heiress (though not without difficulties). Once Halifax gets his foot into the tannery that Phineas' father runs he does his best to prove his mettle, that is true, but John has his friend constantly scheming to his advantage and even giving him an education. In fact, those who expect a spectacular story about John's social rise will not find it, for the scale of the novel is far more local and personal than I expected. In any case, Craik emphasises above all an ethos of mutual care and this is what binds John and Phineas. When, as Craik has it, the Fletcher tannery fails and Phineas finds himself an adult orphan with no working skills, John returns the favour received by inviting his friend to be a permanent member of his household, thus creating quite an interesting triangle.

Phineas' most frank acknowledgment of how he loves John comes in the passage when, remembering the last day he spend alone with his friend before his courtship of Ursula started he writes that "that Sunday was the last I ever had David altogether for my own—my very own". Phineas, however, finds that "It was natural, it was just, it was right" that John wished to marry: "God forbid that in any way I should have murmured". To his wife-to-be Phineas declares that "John is a brother, friend, everything in the world to me" and from that she deduces not that there is something improper going on between the men but that her future husband "must be very good", hence a good choice for her because "good men are rare". There is no question of jealousy between friend and wife at all, quite the opposite: they soon find themselves comfortable in each other's company. Once John is married, Phineas tells his readers that now "others had a right—the first, best, holiest right—to the love that used to be all mine"; seeing his David happy, Phineas writes, "I rejoiced both with and for my brother" though he does miss him from their common house. He is welcome into the newlyweds' home in his first visit as a 'brother' as this is what he becomes to both for more than thirty years.

I believe that what makes *John Halifax, Gentleman* even more interesting as a text, then, is not only that Phineas and John's first youthful friendship becomes brotherhood but that this is sanctioned by Ursula and so becomes the pillar of their triangular association. By sheltering Phineas, John saves him from poverty (his only income comes from some houses rented by working-class families) without making him feel dependent. Phineas claims that he "resisted long" the invitation to join John and Ursula's household, for "it is one of my decided opinions that married people ought to have no one, be the tie ever so close and dear, living permanently with them, to break the sacred duality—no, let me say the unity of their home". Yet, his presence, far from breaking this unity turns him into Uncle Phineas, a sort of third parent, in quite a singular way; after all, he is no blood relative of the married couple and the three are more or less the same age. I cannot think of any arrangement like this in current times (though it is true that in *Great Expectations* Pip lives for more than a decade with his close friend Herbert Pocket and his wife Clara, and their children). Apart from being the reporter for the reader's benefit of his friend's life, Phineas becomes an essential part of the family when he is given an important task: "the children's education was chiefly left to me; other tutors succeeding as was necessary" and a governess for the younger girl. Do let me know where else, in fiction or in real life, you have seen something similar.

The last part of the novel, once the three protagonists are in their fifties and John has become "the patriarch of the valley", as Phineas calls him, is not totally voided of the queer discourse of the first part, with some peculiar interventions from Ursula. When she catches Phineas looking at John during a party and considering how great his 'brother' looks for his age, Ursula knowingly voices aloud this very same impression. And when she falls seriously ill, she implores "Phineas, if anything happens to me, you will comfort John!" In a contemporary novel, the words would carry an unmistakable message but coming from an 1850s novel, they can only mean 'be my husband's support.' I imagine that Craik may have realized that she had a problem at the end of the novel for, if John

died first, Ursula and Phineas would be forced to either go on living together (hardly conceivable) or separate with much sorrow to avoid an awkward situation. If she died first, then could John and Phineas go on living as brothers in the former's mansion? I'm not telling you, of course, what solution Craik found, only that it does reveal the fragility of this unique triangular couple.

Of course, for this arrangement to work John can be the object but not the subject of a queer love, and this love must be disconnected from any kind of possessiveness. On John's side there is no doubt that what he feels is a very deep affection for Phineas that not even the label brotherhood explains well; in fact, two of John's sons quarrel and fail to speak for each other for years, a situation that is simply unthinkable in John and Phineas' case. Phineas says that John's main quality in tenderness and if we were not so obsessed with sexuality we would see that this is the foundation in this novel of a type of love between men that we understand very poorly. I believe that Phineas' love for John is closer to homosexuality but though subtly erotic it is not sexual, which puts the novel in the territory of the homoerotic. I have no idea whether Craik was aware of what she was doing in having her two male character bond so intimately but, looking at things from another perspective, perhaps the novel and the triangular arrangement works so well because sex is not part of the equation. This may sound absurd to 21st century readers and proof incontrovertible of Victorian prudishness but it can be enriching now and then to explore human affection beyond sexuality. I am aware that by using the word queer I am sexualizing Phineas' love in many ways but perhaps this is so because we lack a nuanced vocabulary to discuss friendship apart from sexuality. Don't we?

Craik could have narrated her novel in many ways and, obviously, using a third person omniscient narrator was one. Her choice of Phineas as a first person narrator certainly complicated very much her approach to her main character, for Phineas had to be given necessarily a place as close to John as possible. He could still have played the role of Uncle Phineas and continue living in his own home but Craik possibly decided that this would limit her access to the dynamics of John and Ursula's domestic life. It is true that at moments Phineas plays the role of fly-on-the-wall (he often sits in his corner by the chimney in the family's drawing room with none noticing him there) and that his feelings are no doubt subordinated to those of his 'brother' and 'sister' but I believe that without Phineas John's story would by no means be as interesting. If he manages to be a gentleman fully accepted in society, this is because Phineas imagines him as such carried by his affection for the 'homeless lad' he first meets. In fact, though John is himself a very generous man, nothing compares to Phineas' generosity towards his friend, in terms of how little he gets personally out of their living together for, logically, Ursula and the children come first. Judging by our own criteria, Phineas' life is a sad case of unrequited homosexual love, and it can be certainly read like this, but seen from another point of view, and considering that he lives in the early 19th century, he makes the most emotionally of his bond with the otherwise classically patriarchal John.

If you're into Victorian fiction, please do not miss *John Halifax, Gentleman*, and see how you would feel in Phineas' shoes. Fascinating…

I've been teaching from home for the last three and a half weeks after teaching face-to-face for about four and a half weeks and this seems a good moment to send a second dispatch from the front lines. We have been told to stay home until the end of November, three more weeks then, and with the current very high figures for contagions and deaths by Covid-19 in Catalonia it seems unlikely that we may return to face-to-face teaching this semester. Particularly if, as it seems, a total lockdown might happen next week and because there is a general assumption that we all need to make some sacrifices if Christmas is to be enjoyed with family and friends. Of course, implicit in this is the risk that if we manage to reach Christmas within more or less acceptable levels of contagion, the celebrations may bring yet another new wave. It's a rollercoaster.

So, how are things working? I believe this is a matter of the half-empty, half-full glass or bottle. If you consider that all educational activity could have been stopped at all levels, then we're not doing so poorly, since all universities in Spain are open and working mostly online. If you compare the current situation to how we used to work before the onset of the Covid-19 plague, then there is a general impression of tiredness and a more or less open acknowledgement that online teaching is not replacing adequately face-to-face teaching. This past week, for instance, our degree Coordinator had to send a reminder to our undergraduate students, indicating that their cameras should be on during lectures. Many, it turns out, simply don't connect to their Teams classroom or keep their cameras off, which means a distressing lack of feedback for teachers. I don't know what students have replied to this message but I hope their engagement improves.

I do agree that face-to-face teaching must occupy an important place in higher education but it is my impression that now, when we cannot meet together in the classroom, we are generating a false impression of what actually happens in that situation. To begin with, attendance is not regular. I usually ask students to sign up because I award a grade for class participation and I need to keep track of who is actually there. Students misunderstand my reasons and assume that attendance is compulsory (it is not) and, so, some come to my lectures simply to sign up. The result last year was that a had a small group who spent each whole session discussing whatever they saw in their laptops screens, which had nothing to do with what I was teaching. I have, therefore, stopped checking attendance for I certainly do not need that kind of distraction in class. Better stay away than be in the classroom but mentally elsewhere.

The other matter is participation. As we all know, some students will interact with the teachers every single session while others are perfectly capable of not expressing a single opinion or idea in the whole semester. This is why most of us regularly implement some kind of compulsory classroom activity, otherwise we would have no grades for class participation. What I must say of the students who would never participate in class without this type of grade is that some are shy but have thoughts to share while some simply are there to obtain the credits, particularly in the compulsory courses, doing as little as they can manage. Let's be honest, for once. This is the equivalent of keeping the camera off, then: not attending classes or being there with no intention to participate. It is simply not true that in face-to-face teaching we have totally participative students constantly providing feedback and interacting with us. There is, therefore, little sense in expecting 100% interest in the far more boring (excuse me) online teaching.

A major problem of synchronous online teaching, that is to say, in streaming sessions, whether they are lectures or seminars, is that technology does not allow teachers to look at students in the eye. In order to produce that illusion we teachers need to look at the camera but, logically, if you look at the camera you cannot simultaneously

see the eyes of the person you're addressing. I find this unnerving. In face-to-face teaching you engage students' attention by looking into their eyes (fortunately even facemasks allow us to do that) and, depending on what you see there, you see that you're doing well, or boring people to death. In online teaching, you don't have that kind of contact, not even with the camera on. It is quite possible that this is the reason why so many students switch off their cameras, apart from their preference for being in their pyjamas or the need to conceal untidy rooms. There should be, logically, an etiquette and everyone should be online as formally dressed and positioned as we are in the classroom. But I insist that the lack of direct eye contact is a key factor in how tired we all are of online teaching. I don't doubt that some colleagues know very well how to use streaming to their advantage but there is an evident discomfort in the practice, necessary as it may be now.

On the whole, however, the rush to move from face-to-face teaching to online teaching practically from one day to the next is preventing us from discussing what we do in the classroom and why it should have an equivalent as close as possible online. There are major questions that haven't been asked for a long time, such as what is the purpose of interacting with students, why it is adequate to do that a particular number of hours a week, and what is the place of teacher-centred activities in higher education. The last time these questions were asked was during the process to sign the Dublin agreements that resulted in the new degrees launched around 2008-9, but I believe that the answers obtained were erratic to say the least and ineffective. We were told that we should teach skills rather than content and that assessment should be continuous rather than based on final exams. However, many university teachers still teach by offering lectures without students' intervention and assess by means of final exams, disguised as part of continuous assessment. There is, in my view, an exaggerated reliance on the exam as an adequate tool of assessment, particularly now when, as we are learning, exams are open to all kinds of cheating in an online environment.

The point I'm trying to make, in short, is that teaching remains mostly static despite the changes introduced by the new degrees and will remain mostly static despite the Covid-19 crisis. We are not reinventing teaching but using digital classrooms to do what we did face-to-face, which was mostly what has been done since the Middle Ages: transmit information and then use exams to check that students have acquired it. I know that I am exaggerating but I hope you can see my point.

Proof of this inertia is that the online universities specializing in distance learning are not now the authorities they should be. Each face-to-face university has chosen the software better suited to its needs but none has asked these other universities what they do. I assume that this is because everyone believes that the situation is temporary and sooner or later we will all return to the classrooms. Yet, if you think about it, with only 50 hours out of 150 hours in each 6ECTS course happening there, this means that two thirds of all university teaching are already distance teaching, that is to say, activities happening elsewhere. One place where they happen is the Virtual Campus (whatever this is called in your universities), which I suspect is mostly used as a noticeboard and not used at all by the older staff (as many desperate Deans are now discovering). If we had been making a better use of the asynchronous possibilities of Virtual Campus, then the transition to online teaching would not have been so uncomfortable. Actually, part of the discomfort also has to do with the fact that, at least as happens in my university, we use two different platforms: Teams for online synchronous teaching and Moodle for asynchronous Virtual Campus interaction. I don't know whether this is because Moodle lacks the feature to offer streaming or because Teams is integrated in Outlook, which we use for webmail, but having two platforms does not help at all.

What happens in distance learning and we are failing to understand, is that asynchronous teaching has much more weight. In my own experience of sixteen years

at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya all teaching was asynchronous, which means that students used the resources as they wanted, not within a rigid schedule. During my time at UOC I was never asked to produce narrated PowerPoints, or podcasts, or video and, as far as I'm concerned, I never missed them there. My students learned mainly by reading the materials and the books, and by interacting with me through their exercises, which included forums. I know that some might believe that their learning must have been limited but that was not the case. I asked a friend at UNED how things work there and he told me that tutors, that is to say, the teachers that solve doubts, provide feedback and occasional lectures, work both synchronously and asynchronously. The teachers' working hours are not counted on the base of the time spent in direct contact with students but on the basis of how many are enrolled in class and other factors which are not connected with synchronous teaching. This is, of course, very different from traditional universities in which (at least at UAB) our workload is counted on the basis of classroom teaching and the number of students in the group.

I would, in short, recommend using other strategies than just streaming sessions to interact with students. I find forums a great tool for they can remain open beyond the time limits of the classroom and engage all students, including the shy ones, in conversation. Thus, for instance, my MA students (13 in total) were doing between two and four 10-minute oral presentations in each session followed by debate and complemented by my own introductions (20'-30'). In practice this meant that their presentations were rushed, students lacked the time to react and prepare questions, and my own interaction with them was limited. What we do now is use the same schedule to watch their presentations (narrated PowerPoints) and start interacting in the corresponding forum. The forum remains open for one week and in this way they have more time to send contributions, see my PowerPoint notes, etc. In practice they spend (and I spend) more than our three hours a week interacting but, well, the conversation is far richer. I think that if we go back to the classroom we'll adapt poorly to the time constrains and I'll use anyway the forums.

It's not a matter of always doing the same, then, but of alternating diverse activities. Teach online using streaming if you want, but don't forget forum activities that can be done together, or narrated PowerPoints, or podcasts, or whatever imagination dictates. I wish we were exploring right now new ways of working in virtual environments instead of using the same old way of teaching but online, so that when the Covid-19 pandemic is over our return to the classroom offers richer possibilities than ever.

16 November 2020 / RETROSPECTIVE FEMINISM: *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT* AND THE WOMAN CHESS PLAYER THAT NEVER WAS

Like half the planet, I've been watching these days Netflix's mini-series *The Queen's Gambit* and enjoying it very much despite my total lack of interest in chess. Written and directed by Scott Frank, the mini-series adapts a 1983 novel by Walter Tevis, a truly interesting American author. Some of his titles may ring a bell, for they have been adapted for the cinema screen: *The Hustler* (1959) and its sequel *The Colour of Money* (1984) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963). I strongly recommend *Mockingbird* (1980), on which I wrote here a few years ago. I have not read *The Queen's Gambit*, but it seems to have been inspired by Tevis's own passion for chess (he was an advanced amateur player). Apparently, Tevis wrote in his author's note that "The superb chess of Grandmasters Robert Fischer, Boris Spassky and Anatoly Karpov has been a source of delight to players like myself for years. Since *The Queen's Gambit* is a work of fiction,

however, it seemed prudent to omit them from the cast of characters, if only to prevent contradiction of the record".

The problem with the novel, however, is not so much that it is a work of fiction about a female chess player, Beth Harmon, who never existed but that it is set in a parallel world in which women (or at least one woman) can aspire to be the best world player. In *The Calculating Stars* (2018) by Mary Robinette Kowal women are part of NASA's first missions already because a meteorite strikes the USA in 1952 and colonizing the Moon and next Mars becomes urgent. That, of course, is a science fiction novel. Tevis's novel and the Netflix mini-series are presented, in contrast, as mimetic fiction but we are never told about the reality of women's chess players in the 1950s-1970s period that the plot covers. Beth Harmon, in short, is as fantastic a creation as any of Kowal's lady astronauts but, somehow, we are made to believe that she is more real, which she is not. Beth appears to be a peculiar case of what I will call 'retrospective feminism,' that is to say, a female character who achieves something of historical relevance for women at a time when no woman could aspire to the same feat. I'll argue that this is both positive and negative: positive because it attempts to rewrite history, negative because it is an impossible rewriting and seems to highlight women's shortcomings instead of our achievements.

As I have noted, I'm not interested in chess because, generally speaking, I'm not attracted to games and much less to those that involve any type of earnest competition. I had to learn from scratch then the basics about how the chess world works by watching the series and doing some quick research online. So, for you to know the current world champion is Magnus Carlsen, a 30-year-old Norwegian, and the current woman world champion is Ju Wenjun, a 28-year-old Chinese citizen. Yes, there are separate championships for men and women, though the men's makes no reference to gender because, in principle, it is open to women. Chinese player Yifan Hou, 24, the youngest woman to earn the Grandmaster title (aged 14) is the top-ranking female chess player in the world and the only woman in the World Chess Federation's Top 100 players (currently in position 88). So you see how fantastic Beth Harmon is.

An article in The Conversation by Alex B. Root called [“Why there's a separate World Chess Championship for women”](#) manages to be confusing rather than convincing as regards this matter. Root writes that "segregated tournaments allow those playing to get media attention, benefit financially, and make friends with people with whom they share some similar characteristics. Separate tournaments don't speak to whether there are advantages or disadvantages". Not convincing… Then, he notes that with about 15% of young players being female in the world, this means that because of the "smaller base of females" there are "fewer women than men at the top of the chess rating list", which is even more unconvincing. If things were fair, there should be 15% of women players in the top 100, not just one. Only-women tournaments, Root suggests, "may make chess more attractive to girls and women". Do they…?

The world's top female player ever, Hungarian Grandmaster Judith Polgár (retired since 2014), totally disagrees with gender-segregated chess. She was at her peak the eighth best world player and famously defeated among others, Magnus Carlsen, Anatoly Karpov, Garry Kasparov and Boris Spassky. In an article published last year, Polgár expressed very vocally her opinion that women's chess limits the chances of women players to do their best. "I always knew", she [declares](#), "that in order to become the strongest player I could, I had to play against the strongest possible opposition. Playing only among women would not have helped my development, as since I was 13 I was the clear number one among them. I needed to compete with the other leading (male) grandmasters of my time". In the school and the children's tournaments she runs there is for these reasons no gender segregation.

Reading, however, about why women lose at chess in non-segregated competitions I came across two very interesting pieces. One is an article by Omkar Khandekar about India, the nation were chess was born. He quotes Koneru Humpy, a top female Indian chess player, who simply thinks that men are better at chess. She and other players Khandekar interviewed "pointed to a combination of systemic and societal factors, and a dollop of sexism, that hold back women from realizing their potential in chess. Lack of role models, lack of financial security, male gatekeepers in chess bodies and an overwhelming pay gap in the sport were further deterrents". Yet, many added that "the game needed some innate traits, and that crucial 'killer instinct,' which most women 'lacked'". The author of the article believes that it is rather a matter of being historically disadvantaged and thinks that women have progressed spectacularly in recent years, and will eventually catch up with the boys. But not yet. Kruttika Nadig, a top female Indian player, notes that "Fortunately I didn't experience sexism in the chess world. But for some reason, I found women are a lot more cagey. It was hard for me to find female practice partners. (I would find) guys working with each other, playing with each other... but not that much camaraderie among women". In her world, Beth Harmon is totally alone, the one woman among men (both allies and rivals) but it must be said that she does nothing to connect with other women; and there is one at least asking to be her chess friend.

This leads me to the other article, which deals directly with *The Queen's Gambit* and can be found on *Vanity Fair*. Jennifer Shahade, a two-time U.S. women's chess champion and author of *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* and *Play Like a Girl!*, explains that there are many female child players of chess until around the age of 12, when they start quitting. Chess, she says, is social, "So if you're a girl and you don't have other girls who are playing at your same age range and level and city, it can start to be less interesting. You might just gravitate toward another sport where you have 10 friends". This is still a partial explanation: for whatever reason, and unless they are committed, girls seem to start identifying chess as a boy's game in their teens, possibly when they realize that if they want to go further they need to play in earnest and face the boys' pressure. "I think", Shahade claims, "there are two parts to the world. [One] part is very excited to see girls and women play. And then there's also some undercurrents of resentment. Especially as chess moves online, there are a lot of nasty comments written about girls and women". The Netflix series, with its insistence on the importance of having a team of friendly, supportive players helping you, may certainly encourage girls, and boys, to see matters very differently. But like any other area formerly dominated by men, it'll take time to make things more equal.

It is certainly gratifying to see Beth receive lessons and support from men who do care about her but several matters are less gratifying. To begin with, Beth is dependent since childhood on a sedative similar to Librium which, quite incongruously, is linked to her ability to visualize chess matches in her head. The series corrects the representation of this and other addictions eventually to end up claiming that Beth's talent is not their product. Yet, I worry very much that a young girl, as orphan Beth is when her story begins, possibly around 8 or 10, might believe that there is a link between being a talented player and being an addict. Another complicated matter is Beth's relationship with her adoptive mother Alma (she's adopted in her early teens), herself an alcoholic. Alma supports Beth eventually but only because this brings in substantial earnings from the tournaments that the girl plays. Alma and Beth bond in unexpected, interesting ways but the mercenary nature of Alma's investment in her daughter's success is not too positive.

Finally, there is the matter of clothes… You may visit now the virtual exhibition 'The Queen and the Crown' at the Brooklyn Museum and marvel at the costumes designed for both Netflix series: *The Crown* and *The Queen's Gambit*. The progress of

young Beth Harmon in the world of chess is marked by her gradual physical transformation, not only from child to woman in her twenties but also from terribly dressed ragamuffin to sophisticated 1970s fashion victim. She seems to invest, indeed, most of her earnings in designer clothes. This metamorphosis is a pleasure to watch but it is also a painful reminder that intelligent women characters need to look good to be accepted by TV audiences. The actress who plays Beth, Anya Taylor-Joy, is not an average beauty but she is attractive enough to have worked as a model. Ironically, Beth's French model friend Cleo tells her that she could never be a model because she looks too clever… It's a no-win situation.

Going back to the initial question of retrospective feminism, I'm pleased that Netflix has made *The Queen's Gambit* and young girls may see in Beth interesting possibilities. I cannot call her a role model because of her many addictions but she's an amazingly interesting character. I'm just sorry that the chance has been missed to tell Judit Polgár's real-life story, or the story of the other women trying to compete in the world of chess with the men at the highest possible level. All my encouragement to them.

23 November 2020 / RAMBLING THOUGHTS ON GENDER: A FEW NOTES ON RECENT MATTERS

My post today has to do with a direct question asked by one of my MA students (to what extent is gender natural?) and with issues raised in the paper proposals of my Victorian Literature students, all about Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. So, here we go.

As you will recall, if you're familiar with Dickens' novel, the blacksmith Joe Gargery is constantly abused by his wife, Mrs. Joe, who is also psychologically and physically abusive towards her own youngest brother, Pip, whom she has raised in the absence of their dead parents. In relation to this, one of my students quotes a passage from an article by Judith Johnston which reads: "Mrs. Joe's given name is never revealed in the text, significantly she takes the patronymic, Mrs. Joe, rather than any female name, because Mrs. Joe is a violent woman, possessing a violence more usually male than female" (1992: 97). So, violent women are not really feminine but masculine, hence her name. To begin with, we learn eventually that this woman is called Georgiana Maria like her mother and I have still known in my time women identified by their husband's names, for instance in the name cards on mailboxes (Sr. Juan García and Sra. de García).

I would say that 'Mrs. Joe' is either old 19th century low-class usage or this woman's way of showing that she owns her husband and not the other way round. I see however no sense in the description of her violence as "more usually male than female" because it sounds like an attempt at exonerating all women from the charge of being violent: Mrs Joe feels masculine, therefore she is violent; if she were really feminine she would not be violent. Sorry but violence is violence and if it is committed more often by men in couples this is because usually the balance of power falls on the husband's side. In Mrs Joe's case she has claimed all the power over her abused husband Joe, who not only does not resist the situation but seems, like many other victims, even complicit with it (he does try to excuse Mrs Joe on the same grounds battered wives excuse their husbands). If, as Johnston does, you claim that a woman who abuses her partner is being masculine, then you are saying that victims are always feminine or feminized, thus associating femininity with victimhood. You are also denying women's capacity to inflict violence on others while being no doubt feminine women. And their victims manly, as Joe is.

Let me give you a chilling example of violence committed by women, which left me reeling with shock this week. In Málaga they have judged a young single mother in her early twenties who abandoned her seventeen-month-old baby girl to die of starvation while she lead what has been described as a frantic night life. Obviously, baby Camelia is not only the direct victim of her mother but also of the social values by which this young woman convinced herself that her right to have fun every night went beyond her duty to take care of her daughter. The mother had been offered help by the local authorities but she neglected to claim it. Instead, she got into this routine of abandoning her daughter every day for long hours, until she locked her in a filthy room for good, to die alone.

There is no way this type of violence can be coded masculine yet if we code it feminine, which it appears to be in view of the mother's gender, we are emphasizing that caring for children is a typically feminine ability which this woman is somehow lacking. In fact, the readers' comments in the newspapers where I have read about this crime always emphasize that poor Camelia's death is doubly heinous because her mother, who should have cared for her, abandoned her to die. The father, a violent guy banned from seeing his daughter under a restraining order, is never mentioned, though presumably he also had the duty of taking care of the baby. My point is that if caring for others were truly natural in biological women, as growing breasts is, this young mother would have naturally taken care of her baby. Her disinterest, and cruelty, show that there is nothing natural in mothers' caring for babies, but plenty of socializing since childhood, when we girls are all given dolls to learn the ropes. By the way, the young mother appears to be mentally healthy, she is no psychopath, though we no doubt find her behaviour monstrous.

Where am I going with all this? I'm expressing my tiredness with the way we attribute human behaviour (not only violence) to supposedly gendered traits. If a woman in assertive, then she is masculine. If a man is caring, then he is feminine. This persistent binarism is an obstacle for progress because for as long as individuals identify with a gender and that gender is identified with a set of traits there is no way gender can be reconfigured for good. I am beginning to think that Judith Butler's notion of performativity works fine in theory but very poorly in practice.

On a more positive note let me tell you about men and skirts. A few weeks ago a boy somewhere in Northern Spain, the equivalent of a high school senior, decided to wear a skirt to class, just to give it a try. He was taken to the school psychologist who, it can be surmised from the questions, treated him as a possible case of transgenderism, which he is not. Mikel, as the boy is called, was later punished by his parents, which led him to publish a TikTok video narrating that strange day in his life. The reaction was a collective protest by male students like him all over Spain who turned up the following day in school wearing skirts. The idea they supported, by the way, was not that each gender had the right to use other genders' clothing but that clothing should be genderless. I still think we're far from seeing young Spanish boys wearing dresses but, since girls wear trousers and nobody thinks today of them as men's wear that might happen. We need time, and not only here. Look at the hullaballoo caused by ex-One Direction's Harry Styles and his recent *Vogue* interview, in which he appears modelling dresses. "Anytime you're putting barriers up in your life, you're limiting yourself", the cover blurb reads. And he's right.

So, why do we limit individuals, telling them that what they do is 'too feminine' or 'too masculine' if they feel that is part of who they are? And the other way round, why do we limit persons telling them that they must be 'masculine' or 'feminine' for that is in their nature? I'll insist again that though bodies are a biological fact (though much more open to interpretation than we assume), our gendered behaviour is a social construction, still too depending on stereotypes attached to gender roles that should have been discarded long ago.

At this point, then, perhaps I need to mention Minister Irene Montero's new law to regulate official gender identity in Spain, also known as the Ley Trans. I must say that this is very similar to the Scottish law that caused J.K. Rowling to make a series of concerned comments after which she was accused of being transphobic. Basically, the two laws grant transgender persons the right to identify themselves in official documentation as individuals of a specific gender regardless of their biological bodies. As you can see, the intention is to make it easier for trans persons to be officially men or women just by stating their preference and without having to completely transform their bodies, if they choose so. Thus, a teen starting transition might immediately choose their new official identity rather than wait for years for a judge to grant that right on an individual basis, as it is done now.

The problem is that in areas in which biological sex is still determinant, such as sports, this may have negative effects for a biological male might apply to compete as a woman (by gender, not by sex). Leaving Rowling aside, I must notice that a group of what the press has dubbed as 'historic Spanish feminists' (Amelia Valcárcel Bernaldo de Quirós, Ángeles Álvarez Álvarez, Laura Freixas Revuelta, Marina Gilabert Aguilar, Alicia Miyares Fernández, Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, Victoria Sendón de León and Juana Serna Masiá) sent the Minister an open letter opposing the law. They worry about the confusion between sex and gender in Montero's projected legislation and about the new vocabulary erasing the materiality of women's bodies, which "makes women invisible and erases us with the excuse of inclusivity". In fact, what I find most interesting about the letter is the call to erase gender rather than to make it even more visible by law. Why not have official documents suppress all reference to gender? Having said that, it would be interesting to see what would happen if suddenly millions of women in Spain declared they want to be men officially, a point my feminist colleagues have not contemplated in their writing but that in principle the new law might sanction.

My rambling post, in short, wants to remind you of the fact that the more we think about gender, the less we seem to agree or even understand what is going on. I am currently working on quite a complex novel by Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312*, in which most human beings are free to choose how to modify their bodies and in which the protagonists are a female-identifying gynandromorph and a male-identifying androgyn. This is 300 years in the future but to be honest I can't even imagine how people will feel about gender in 3 years' time. When this novel was published, in 2012, less than ten years ago, talk of non-binary persons was non-existent, whereas now it is all the rage (leaving by the way, Montero's binary law quite obsolete). What is natural and what is biological in gender matter is harder and harder to decide. My hope is that one day we will stop being masculine or feminine in binary fashion, and even non-binary, to be just persons. That sex and gender, in short, could be factors as small in our lives as whether we like apples or pears. That would be a relief.

6 December 2020 / AFTER WATCHING *THE CROWN*: WONDERING WHY I CARE…

Needing entertainment I chose to spend close to 40 hours watching the four seasons of Netflix's *The Crown* (2016-). It has been impossible these last few weeks to ignore the abundant articles and blog posts on the alleged misrepresentation of the British Royal Family in the new fourth season, released in mid-November, as I just got curious. As you possibly know, so worried is the British Government about this matter that the culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, asked Netflix last week to insert a warning at the beginning of each episode declaring that the series is intended to be fiction. I am under the impression

that most spectators are aware that the series is not a documentary, but it seems there is some concern that the younger generation might take *The Crown* as a reliable history lesson. Naturally, there is also concern that the living persons represented in the Netflix series may be offended by their portraits, or even the object of social media attacks. The main worry in that sense is the Royal Family's inability to protect Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, for the renewed wave of hatred against her as the late Princess Diana's rival for the love of Charles, the Prince of Wales.

I recall in all detail the shock of hearing about Lady Diana Spencer's tragic death in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris on Saturday evening, 31 August 31. I heard about the lethal car crash the following morning, when a neighbour told me, still amazed by the grim news. Diana was nothing to us, and I personally had no admiration for her, but she was an immense celebrity and still very young, just 36. There have been rumours to this day that MI5 had followed orders by Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, to have Diana killed, fearing that the by then divorced ex-wife of Prince Charles was about to marry Muslim Harrods' heir Dodi al Fayed supposedly because she was pregnant by him. The supposition behind these rumours was that the Crown did not want the future King, William, to have a Muslim half-brother. I find all this conspiracy theory nonsense, though it appears that Diana really had the intention of marrying a Muslim, Pakistani surgeon Dr Hasnat Khan, and was dating al Fayed, who also died in the crash, just to make this other man jealous. That's the thing about the Royals… they make you engage in gossip, whether you are naturally gossipy or not. Anyway, on the day news of Diana's death reached me, it was clear as daylight that the car crash had been provoked by the relentless pursuit of the media. The paparazzi started pestering young Diana the day it was known she was dating Prince Charles and, I have no doubt whatsoever, eventually caused her death; it was manslaughter though not direct murder. I fail to understand why this type of harassment is tolerated when any ordinary citizen chased by another citizen has the right to report this to the Police as a crime.

On the whole, I have enjoyed far more the three seasons of *The Crown* previous to the point when my own memory of events started. Once Diana appeared in season four, memory and dramatization got entangled and I started questioning not so much the truthfulness of the series as finding it too focused on the triangle formed by the Princess, Charles, and Camilla. For the first three seasons, the series works in a far more appealing way, with each episode being a self-contained narration of a particular crisis. And in that sense in can be taken as an History lesson, not because it tells the truth but because it send you rushing to Wikipedia and other sources to check for yourself. On average, I have spent about 30 minutes reading online for each episode, sometimes finding that the events narrated were quite different but also learning about matters I knew nothing about, or just very little. Looking back, I find that episode 3 in season 3, dealing with the Aberfan disaster, which claimed in 1966 the lives of 28 adults and 116 children when a colliery spoil tip collapsed in this Welsh mining town, was not only extremely poignant but also, on the whole, a valuable lesson on the Monarch's duties. Now we are used to the images of Kings and Queens comforting the families of the victims of disasters or terrorist attacks but at the time this was a novelty, and whether this is strictly how Queen Elizabeth II behaved or not, the reflection that show-runner Peter Morgan (also author of most scripts) presents is valuable. Of course, what he offers is an interpretation based on his own personal thesis about the events narrated but if his views have currently more weight than those of the British historians, then we need to consider why giving reliable History lessons to the general public is generally such a daunting task. In this time of fake news and when American historians are begging President Trump not to destroy crucial documentation when he leaves the White House, as it is assumed he will do, this is more important than ever.

Season four, I read, has been quite traumatic to watch for those Britons who recalled Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's mandate (1979-1990) in all detail. If you closed your eyes and listen to the marvellous Gillian Anderson, here playing Thatcher, you will certainly get goosebumps—at least, I did. Anderson has done better than Meryl Streep in *The Iron Lady* (2011). Yet, having spent 1985-86 in Britain as an au-pair, a period which included my stay for a few months in the borough of Finchley in North London, Thatcher's own electoral district or constituency, I missed more about her mandate. Yes, the Falklands War was there (though no way she got into it distracted by her son Mark's going missing during the Paris Dakar rally), and the final crisis that pushed her out of her long-held Prime Minister seat was there, but not the miners' strike of 1984-85, the Poll Tax crisis and other events. Instead, we got the appalling soap opera that Charles and Diana's romance was from its very onset.

The problem, perhaps, is that in current times each of us has become an amateur historian and we all have theories about what did or did not happen. I read an article by a woman journalist who claimed that now she finally understood Lady Diana, but to understand her I believe that the 2017 documentary *Diana: In Her Own Words* (also on Netflix) works much better. Not only because it reproduces interviews secretly taped to help journalist Andrew Morton to write his best-selling tribute *Diana: Her True Story* (1993) but because, ironically, it is easier to understand Prince Charles by listening to Diana's own testimonial. *The Crown* argues that Diana was treated with total coldness by the Royal Family and by Charles himself, and so she is presented as their victim, but her own words present her as a victim of her own immaturity and of a grand vision of herself that Charles' choice of her as his bride fulfilled, with horrific consequences. At many points of the documentary Diana is heard saying that she expected guidance from her husband, who was thirteen years her senior, but instead only got contempt for her immaturity. Peter Morgan has, in any case, a similar theory about Charles's upbringing and treatment by his parents: that he received a cold-shoulder when he expected warmth and, yes, guidance. These were, then, two misguided individuals led to marry for the Crown's convenience despite being woefully ill-suited to each other—which happens all the time, though in far less politically significant circumstances.

The history of the British monarchy as told in *The Crown* is, of course, a fascinating tale about how Western ideas of marriage have changed. Despite initial difficulties caused by Prince Phillip's reluctant subordination to his wife, who is also his Queen, and his sense of emasculation as a man, the couple agree that divorce can never be an option. The real-life couple have been married for 73 years, and I must wonder whether theirs is one of the currently longest-lived marriages on Earth. The marriage may have survived with some infidelities on his side, as Peter Morgan hints in his series (though recall how Prince Phillip said it was hardly possible to commit adultery with a policeman shadowing his every move), but it is still there, whereas three of the couple's four children have got divorced: Charles, but also Anne and Andrew; only Edward, who wed Sophie Rhys-Jones in 1999, is still married.

The episodes of *The Crown* dealing with Princess Margaret are in this sense pitiful to watch: her relationship with divorced Group Captain Peter Townsend ended when she chose her privileges as a Princess over a civil marriage to him and a private life away from England; later, she did marry in Westminster Abbey with the acquiescence of Crown and Church but her union with talented bisexual photographer Tony Armstrong-Jones was anything but placid. The message we are given is not really that the Royals are failing to do their duty by staying married, but that the changes in the idea of marriage, from life-long commitment accompanied by a high degree of personal compromise to a relationship supposed to provide sexual and sentimental fulfilment, has changed radically. Of course, the old-fashioned model may have worked for Elizabeth and Phillip, but we are now seeing in Spain how the long-lasting union of the still married Juan Carlos

and Sofía, was a sham all along. The united front they presented was crucial for the transition into democracy, but the former King's long stream of mistresses and his shady financial dealings is revealing to us not only the less palatable aspects of his personality but that Spain on the whole respected a man who did not respect the women in his life, beginning with his wife, nor his fellow Spanish citizens.

In all this matter of the Windsors, the most intriguing participant is, no doubt, Camilla Parker-Bowles, née Shand. In hindsight, it is quite clear that Charles and Camilla should have married not long after they met in the 1970s but most biographers agree that she was seen as a commoner (which Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle are) and was sexually too experienced (Lord Mountbatten advised Charles to marry a virgin); besides, as Charles's junior by just one year she was ready to marry while he was told to sow his wild oats before wedding anyone. As we all know by now, in 1973 Camilla married Andrew Parker-Bowles, a man all accounts agree that she did love, and had to watch his ex-boyfriend marry the virginal Lady Diana Spencer in 1981. I was astonished to listen to Diana herself explain in the 2017 documentary that she had avoided having any boyfriends, and had kept herself "tidy", just in case that became required. The girl, nicknamed Duch by her family, had fairy-tale dreams of marrying at Westminster Abbey one day, perhaps even being a Queen. I'm not saying that she was a calculating teen, but there is something unsettling about a woman that decided to remain a virgin till marriage in the late 1970s/early 1980s. That was unusual. Anyway, in past times, or not so past if we think of Queen Sofía, Diana could have played her assigned role as future Queen and tolerate Camilla as the official mistress. That, however, was not to be, and the irony is that now Camilla is finally Charles' wedded wife. They married in 2005, in a civil ceremony (as Camilla is a divorcee), though Camilla is known as the Duchess of Cornwall, not the Princess of Wales because that was Diana's title. If Charles is ever crowned, which seems doubtful, she would be Princess Consort, though it is known that the British heir wants his wife to be crowned Queen. I was going to write 'fat chance'…

When the credits of the last episode rolled, my husband and I burst out laughing. He had joined me in the second season, attracted by the high quality of the dialogue written by Morgan and his other scriptwriters. The reason why we laughed is that we found ourselves at specific points feeling deep empathy for some of the characters, despite our republicanism and general mistrust of families who inherit absurd, anachronistic privileges. We have, then, embarrassed ourselves a little bit by following the lives of Queen Elizabeth's family. I read that Prince William and Prince Harry are very much against the addition of a sixth season dealing with their lives to the planned five seasons, and I doubt that I'll watch more of this show. To disconnect, in fact, I watched one episode of the hilarious, over-the-top *The Windsors*, also on Netflix, and a few episodes of the new *Spitting Image*. I must, in any case, take my hat off to British monarchy and British society in general for their ability to endure misrepresentation and satire with no major political damage. Here in Spain we are light years away from that.

14 December 2020 / WORLD AND TIME ENOUGH: QUEER HERMAPHRODITISM AND MATURE ROMANCE IN KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S *2312*

I'm working these days on an article about Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *2312*, which has turned out to be a love story. Science fiction does not often deal with that topic, and, besides, this novel has been mainly read as a utopian tale of regeneration after Earth is devastated by the effects of climate change. Robinson presents a scenario in which Earth is a backward remnant of pre-Spacer times, preventing its own survival while Mars, the

Saturn League, and Mercury progress towards a new alliance which will one day leave our stubborn little planet and its pseudo-feudal capitalism (the author's appreciation) behind. As it is typical of Robinson's fiction, the world building is energetic and requires masses of information that, without constituting info-dumps as they do in less gifted writers, do conceal in this case the centrality of the romantic motif. That *2312* is essentially a love story is not, after all, my own impression, but the author's own. At least he declared at the time of publication that "I began with the idea of the romance at the center of the novel, between two people from Mercury and Saturn who were (surprise!) mercurial and saturnine in character, and thus a real odd couple". The project of building their high-tech future civilization became necessarily "a major component of the novel, but it all began by trying to give the central romance its proper setting", three hundred years into our future (in Susan De Guardiola "The Future Is Fun". *Publishers Weekly*, 259.10, March 2012, 54).

To make matters even more complicated, Robinson's odd couple is composed by two persons—Swan Er Hong from Mercury and Fitz Wahram from Titan, one of the moons of Saturn—who are not particularly likeable and who take a long time to have a series of almost random meetings transform into something that we might call with conviction romance. It took me two readings (the kind of exercise to which you only submit for academic reasons, or out of love for a writer) to grasp the mechanics of their love, and a third reading, which I finally totally enjoyed, to truly warm up to them. So, as you can see, I am recommending *2312* only to sf die-hards willing to go to all that trouble to enjoy an interplanetary tale of love.

What finally struck a chord with me is that Swan and Wahram have time and space as we don't have, for theirs is a world in which longevity is expanding (reaching the 200 year mark is common) and in which none of members of the new post-human sub-species known as the Smalls have yet died of old age. The more years you live, as we're beginning to learn in real-life, the harder it is to think of marriage for life. Swan's grandmother Alex had lived with her partner for 70 years before she died (please recall that Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of Edinburgh have been married for 73 years) but what do love and marriage mean when you're life expectancy might be in the hundreds? As for space, which does not seem to trouble Swan and Wahram in their many comings and goings across the Solar System to which Robinson confines space travel, I was reminded of Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', but in reverse since *2312's* odd couple have "world enough and time" to let their love grow "Vaster than empires and more slow". It doesn't take Wahram "Two hundred to adore each breast" Swan possesses nor "thirty thousand to the rest" but about three years for him to declare his love, which (attention!) is but a blink of the eye, considering that he is 113 and she 137. The 24 year gap, however, is nothing in a context in which, as it appears, people remain young as they age, at least judging by Swan's fierce love of physical adventure.

Now, here comes the really peculiar gender bit in Robinson's world: longevity is significantly improved for the individuals he calls bisexual but are really hermaphrodites, possessing a male and a female sex (we call them usually intersexuals). This is the accidental result of therapies that have led "to very sophisticated surgical and hormonal treatments for interventions in utero, in puberty, and during adulthood. The XX/XY dichotomy still exists, but in the context of a wide variety of habit, usage, and terminology". As Robinson adds, "principal categories of self-image for gender include feminine, masculine, androgynous, gynandromorphous, hermaphroditic, ambisexual, bisexual, intersex, neuter, eunuch, nonsexual, undifferentiated, gay, lesbian, queer, invert, homosexual, polymorphous, poly, labile, berdache, hijra, two-spirit", with some "cultures deemphasizing gender (…) sometimes referred to as ursuline cultures", a nice wink at Ursula K. Leguin's masterpiece *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) in which the Gethenians remain sexless and genderless except for a few days every cycle. As for

Swan and Wahram, she is a woman-identified gynandromorph and he is a man-identified androgyne. Both have parented children as mothers and fathers.

Among readers that did not enjoy *2312*, no complaint is louder than that of Robinson's admirer and fellow sf author, Vandana Singh. She wrote in her blog a scathing indictment of this novel ([“Why KSR's *2312* is a Fail on Many Counts”](#). *Antariksh Yatra: Journeys in Space, Time and the Imagination* 19 March 2013, that, focused, above all, on the patronizing attitude that Swan and Wahram assume towards Earth. Swan's misguided attempts to help Africans build homes fast with the help of AI-guided machinery is totally inacceptable in the context of the novel but Singh was incensed above all by how the couple and their extra-terrestrial allies decide to start a revolution on Earth to increase the safety of the other more prosperous planets. Singh denounces that this smacks of the worst colonial ideology, as Earthlings are treated as if “They aren't people” but just “a monolithic mass of misery, beyond help”.

Her anger against what she calls Robinson's betrayal of his post-colonial readers expands to his alleged mismanagement of the gender issues: “It is worth mentioning also that despite its apparent imaginativeness on the subject of human sexuality, gender and variations thereof, the book seems to idealize heterosexual mating, although between hermaphroditic beings. (Come on!) The romance between the two main characters, even independent of sexuality, does not come across as believable”. I was flabbergasted by this—not because Singh found the romance unappealing, as I found it when I first read the novel, but because she decried Robinson's supposed idealization of heterosexual mating. Now, here's the only sex scene in *2312*. Judge for yourself: “Now it was said that their particular combination of genders was the perfect match, a complete experience, 'the double lock and key', all possible pleasures at once; but Wahram had always found it rather complicated. As with most wombmen, his little vagina was located far enough down in his pubic hair that his own erection blocked access to it; the best way to engage there once he was aroused was for the one with the big vagina to slide down onto the big penis most of the way, then lean out but also back in, in a somewhat acrobatic move for both partners. Then with luck the little join could be made, and the double lock and key accomplished, after which the usual movements would work perfectly well, and some fancier back-and-forths also. Swan turned out to be perfectly adept at the join, and after that she laughed and kissed him again. They warmed up pretty fast”.

Quoting Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* is not something I do frequently, for fear of misreading her opaque philosopher's prose. But I found in its pages that given that heteronormativity is maintained by the 'logic' that 'he' is the penetrator and 'she' the penetrated “then, without this heterosexual *matrix*, as it were, it appears that the stability of these gendered positions would be called into question” (51, original italics). So, if you have a couple for whom sex consists of mutual penetration, I understand that this cannot be heterosexual mating, as Singh calls it, but something else. Furthermore, Butler notes, “The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender” (239, original italics). Neither for Wahram nor for Swan is their double sex and gendered identity an obstacle in this sense: both have had a diversity of sexual partners and both have, as noted, fathered children and been mothers. In fact, Robinson goes as far as to have Swan visit several times a former partner that goes by the gender-neutral name Zasha and for whom he never uses a personal pronoun. The child Swan and Zasha have parented together is a girl but though it appears that Swan was the father, this does not mean that Zasha, the alleged mother, is a woman. She could be another gynandromorph or a wombman like Wahram. Or someone else in gender terms altogether.

My personal perception is that Robinson is trying to do many things at the same time with Swan and Wahram. To begin with, I don't think he offers conventional heterosexuality disguised as something else with this couple's hermaphroditism but a comment on how perhaps only mutual penetration in intercourse could break heterosexuality away from heteronormativity. I am tempted to use the word heteroqueer for Swan and Wahram but I realize that it falls short since they are not really heterosexual: they are bisexual intersexuals, but I'm not sure whether there is a category for them, taking into account that each member of the couple identifies as either a man or a woman. Following this binary identification, they cannot be called gender-neutral or gender-fluid, so perhaps what Robinson is saying with all this is that not even three hundred years into the future will we have solved the matter of gender—though I hope we do sooner than that.

Actually, and this is the other big statement in the novel about sex, Robinson is saying that it just matters far less than love. In his otherwise quite insufferable philosophical novel *On Love*, Alain de Botton has some brilliant moments and, so, he says through the narrative voice of his main male character that love should be divided into mature and immature, categories by which he does not mean a difference connected with age but with idealization. Immature love is trapped by it, hence bound to be disappointing, yet this is the type we prefer. In contrast, "the philosophy of mature love is marked by an active awareness of the good and bad within each person, it is full of temperance, it resists idealization, it is free of jealousy, masochism, or obsession, it is a form of friendship with a sexual dimension, it is pleasant, peaceful, and reciprocated (and perhaps explains why most people who have known the wilder shores of desire would refuse its painlessness the title of 'love')" (185). I find that Swan and Wahram's love is a great instance of mature love in this sense, though it is true that their romance is also mature because both are facing what could be called a second life, when most of the experiences of a habitual life have been gone through, and neither fully knows what to do with the years ahead.

When the word marriage starts looming in their horizon, Swan wonders what this old-fashioned patriarchal word may mean in a society in which, Robinson writes, "affection, child rearing, sex, lust, cohabitation, family, and friendship have all been delinked from each other and reconfigured as affect states" and in which individuals are free to engage in "line marriage, group marriage, polygamy, polyandry, panmixia, timed contracts, crèches, sexual friendships" in whatever capacity they choose. Yet, as Stephanie Coontz writes in *Marriage a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (2005), marriage remains, though "optional and more brittle" still "the highest expression of commitment" (309). Perhaps it will be still that in 2312, on Mars, Mercury, Titan or wherever Swan and Wahram choose to live. Of course, there is no guarantee that a union across vast time and space can work better than a union among conventionally aged humans living together 24/7 but Robinson is throwing at us this peculiar 'what if?' and it is just fascinating to consider its implications—had we but world and time enough.

21 December 2020 / RECALLING TIMES PAST: ACADEMIC WORK 1980-2020

As someone wrote recently, it makes sense to think of the 1970s as 40 years ago but how can 1980 be 40 years ago? This has come to my mind in relation to a question asked by one of my Master's students. He wanted to know whether, on the whole and considering our current access to countless sources of information, academic writing has improved in the Humanities. This question started my recollection of the times when I

didn't have access to the Internet, much less to a computer. Having been born in the mid-1960s, I'm old enough to have seen a dramatic change in academic work in my own lifetime. As this student told me, there will be far less difference between the academic life of people born in the 1990s and in the 2020s than there is between the academic life of the people born like myself in the 1960s and that of those born in the 1990s. I can only say that he's totally right.

So let me go back to 1980, the year when I started secondary school. The first papers I handed in were handwritten, a situation which continued for at least three more years until my fourth and last course, what used to be called *Curso de Orientación Universitaria* (College Orientation Course). If you think that what comes next is the arrival of a PC to my working-class home you are in an alternate universe. What I got then, when I was 17, was my grand-father's second-hand typewriter, a rather basic, heavy Olivetti. I recall in one particular instance a long Literature paper which I wrote by hand and my mom typed late into a Sunday evening; she had been an admin clerk before marrying, and still had the typing skills that I have never acquired. The typewriter in question, however, had a few glitches, one of which was that the Spanish orthographic stress key was broken. This means that the accents in my paper, which was in Spanish, were all open, in Catalan style. My teacher forgave me because she knew from what kind of home I came from.

This state of matters continued for a while. I enrolled as a university student in 1984, that Orwellian year. I continued using a typewriter, though I seem to recall a lighter new Olivetti made of plastic, with some suspicion that it was not mine but, again, someone else's. I continued writing handwritten and typed papers based, of course, on school library resources until 1987. I spent the year 1986-87 in England as an au-pair girl and all my communication with my family and friends was through handwritten letters and the occasional phone call from a phone booth. Only when I returned from England did I finally have access to a computer, that of my boyfriend at the time, a nerdish type who grasped how important PCs would be before this was generally understood. All this time, please notice, I was still using library resources: those of my own university, the Autònoma, and the resources of the British Institute in Barcelona, which were in many cases better than what I found at UAB.

After completing the five-year *Licenciatura*, I started in 1991 my doctoral studies. Doctoral programmes consisted of two years of taking courses with a third year for writing your first dissertation, or *tesina*. I still wrote mine using bibliography on paper from libraries because although the Internet had already been born it only existed in very limited military and scientific circles. I recall purchasing dozens of articles, very expensively photocopied, from the British Library. I started work on my doctoral dissertation in 1993, spending one year in Scotland (1994-95), still with no internet access, not even e-mail. Like back in 1986-87, all communication with family and friends was done though snail mail and phone calls (no cell phones yet!). I submitted my doctoral dissertation in 1996 still without an Internet connexion, though the novelty then was the introduction of email in our communications. This means that if you wanted to publish an article you would snail-mail the hard copies of the article accompanied by a cover letter and then whether the article was accepted or not would be communicated to you in the same way, by letter.

The first academic websites were started then, in the mid-1990s, and some look as they did originally. I was going through the Victorian website the other day and I realised that the layout and most of the texts that you can find there possibly come from that time. The same goes for many other websites built in the 1990s on a voluntary basis that need a revamp but will be lost for lack of volunteers. My post-doc life begins in 1996, when home Internet access also became generally available, but without a flat rate, which means that any prolonged consultation with any website could potentially cost a lot of

money. In 1998 I became a consultant at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, the first online university in Spain, and that was an interesting position because the job included free Internet access. Telefónica eventually offered, around 2000, a flat rate, which was really the moment when the Internet took off in Spain (and so did illegal downloading of music, films, books…).

From 2000 onwards, then, we academics started having access to many online sources, which means that composing a bibliography became quite easy. Months of research could suddenly be done in one afternoon sitting before your computer, accessing catalogues anywhere in the world. However, what truly made the difference was database access. A catalogue tells you what is available and where, but the database usually contains part of what is available as downloadable texts and that makes an enormous difference. You might have a bibliography which is 200 entries long but if none of those sources is really accessible there is not much point in its bulk. The wonder of research in the last 15 years, then, is not only that any list can be quickly compiled but also that you can download onto your computer in just a few hours many sources, particularly articles in journals. Books remain a grey area of research because not so many are accessible from college libraries as e-books. Universities subscribe to article databases but there are not equivalent book databases, which is the reason why everyone is using Google Books but keeping quiet about it. The price of academic books has gone through the roof so that few researchers and even few libraries can actually purchase books, which may easily cost 100 euros or more (a non-illustrated hardback). So, thanks Google!, you know what for.

The abundance of sources does not necessarily mean, however, that we are producing better research or better academic writing. A typical article in the Humanities usually contains around thirty secondary sources. They take less time to be located but still take a long time to be read. In the past, before the 1990s, when theory exploded, researchers in the Humanities could get away with using a maximum of ten sources for each article. This is a luxury that we can no longer afford. The proliferation of bibliography might seem to be a benefit and in many senses it is. Yet, at the same time, it has resulted in a style of writing that is very constrictive. Most articles I read these days consist of a long barrage of quotations taking the introduction and usually two thirds of the article itself, leaving just a little corner, usually less than one third of the article, for the actual discussion of the text supposedly analysed in it. Before so much bibliography was available and used, literary criticism *was* literary criticism, that is to say, it was an exercise in reading focused on what the primary source did say. The voice of the scholar had to be strong because it had to sustain the whole analysis, and so you got classics of literary criticism such as Leslie Fiedler, Tony Tanner, John Hillis Miller, Marianne Thormählen, Catherine Belsey, Elaine Showalter and so on.

Now there is very little room for one's own voice among so many secondary sources, and to be honest this is one of the reasons why I started writing this blog: I was losing my voice in my own academic production. Since the need to publish has grown enormously, this means that you have less time for each of the articles or chapters you write; many sources need to be read diagonally, looking for that quotation which will contribute to your own article. Articles are more frequently quoted than books because a) they are more easily found in databases, b) can be read more quickly. Nobody uses bibliographies in which most items are books that must be read from beginning to end, for a quotation ends up costing too many working hours. That's our reality. All this constant flow of bibliography, then, is coming when we have least time to benefit from it: to sit down and absorb whatever may be new and exciting. In my worst days I think that literary criticism is dead and we are just endlessly circulating the secondary sources without really paying much attention to what the literary authors themselves are saying.

Post-1990s academic rhetoric, in short, has eaten up academic creativity in Literary Studies, and even in the apparently less conventional Cultural Studies.

This can be very daunting for a beginner in the field but, like all rhetoric, academic writing has a playful side. You need to look at academic research as a complex game, with rules that need to be mastered. I do not mean that scholarship is trivial or banal. I just mean that in order to get published you need to learn how to play the game, and this includes understanding which sources you need to check and how valuable they are for you. Having said that and although I'm not going to praise those times when literary criticism was written by hand and based on what your university library housed, we have certainly lost an indefinite something. The Internet has brought the world to our fingertips, but our brain still needs time to process information and deliver solid discourse. Yet time is what we most lack now, in our frantic effort to excel when more people than ever are in academia.

In a sense, then, the cyberpunk dream of the 1980s—if only we could access all the academic riches computers contain—has become if not a nightmare, certainly a source of anxiety, for those who rule academic life have decided that we need to use that flood of information to generate a flood of academic work and so increase the deluge until nobody can really follow it. The solution is to work on one's own little corner, and play the game as best one can.

11 December 2021 / DONALD TRUMP: PATRIARCHAL VILLAINY AT WORK

A year ago I published a monographic volume called *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* in which I aimed at showing how real-life and fictional villains embody patriarchy's promise of power to complicit men. Some fulfil that promise to a degree so hyperbolic that they need to be eliminated, hence the need for heroes. Most ambitious patriarchal men, however, understand that there are legal and ethical limits to their power. They struggle anyway to take their empowerment as far as possible, risking a downfall but protecting themselves effectively whether they are called Mark Zuckerberg or Vladimir Putin. In other cases, such as that of Hitler or Voldemort, the massive sense of entitlement overwhelms all caution, resulting in a series of missteps that lead to an eventual downfall. I believe this is what we have seen this past week with Donald Trump's enticement of his followers to take the Capitol and prevent Joe Biden from being formally proclaimed as the next US President. Trump has gone too far in his villainy, heroically stopped by the Senate and Congress, but although he seems to have reached the end of his political career (if the impeachment proceeds he will be banned from holding any kind of public office), the future looks uncertain. Most tyrannies end with the death of the tyrant, but we still need to see how democracy copes with a living would-be tyrant.

The assault on democracy of last January 6 has been brewing since the very day Republican Trump won the Presidential election against Democrat Hillary Clinton in November 2016, if not earlier. As I have written here diverse times, I blame American women for Trump's win: many more men than women voted for Hillary Clinton, and that says all we need to know about the failure of feminism in the United States. I do not particularly sympathize with Senator Clinton but given the choice between her and the patriarchal monster Donald Trump, I would not have hesitated to vote for her. The question, then, is why American women allowed Trump to be elected, both the liberal women who did not bother to vote at all, and the conservative women who voted for this pussy-grabbing narcissist. How the man who was mostly considered a joke by 80%

Americans in 2015 could become the US President in 2016 is a gendered matter indeed. In view of how he has degraded the American Presidency to limits unthinkable before his election, I believe many US voters owe a deep apology to Senator Clinton. I do not know what kind of President she would have been but one thing is certain: a much better one than the resident monster at the White House.

The one thing I most clearly remember about the 2016 election was President Obama saying in an informal TV intervention, addressing Trump himself, something along the lines of "the difference between you and me is that I will be remembered as an American President but you won't, you're not qualified", implying that he would never be elected. There was in this remark both total lucidity (Trump indeed was not qualified) and a bit of arrogance, which possibly has incapacitated the Democratic Party from fighting Trump more adequately. Just as I blame the Democratic women for not having mobilized all American women in favour of Hillary Clinton, I blame the Democratic men for not having been more effective in countering Trump's worst traits as a patriarchal man. Joe Biden's calm, sedate personality (from what I see) seems to be what is needed now, but throughout the four years of this nightmare I have been wondering, much peeved and annoyed, why former President Obama was not opposing Trump more forcefully. I understand that an implicit rule of American politics prevents former Presidents from criticising their successors but I believe that Obama has gone too far in obeying that rule. I very much doubt that Trump will show so much leniency towards Biden, particularly if he still thinks of a hypothetical 2024 re-election but even if that goal is out of bounds for whatever legal reasons. In most democracies there is an opposition leader keeping the Prime Minister on their toes, and I believe that this figure is sorely missing in US politics. The President has, in short, too much power.

Surprised as I have been by the barrage of disrespect with which President Trump has been treated by late night show hosts and a variety of political critics, I have been even more surprised by the tolerance shown towards his behaviour. Yes, Trump was impeached, but this is a man whose personal demeanour is simply outrageous. He has shattered all the limits, from being known as a sexual abuser to making constant diplomatic gaffes in his dealings with the likes of Putin or Kim Jong-Un. Any other democratic leader in the world would have been ousted by far less, and new elections called to replace him. And that's another weakness, I think, of the American democracy: its inefficient electoral system. I am not siding at all with Trump's claim that the system is fraudulent (funny how he never raised the issue when he was himself elected) but noting that it is too inflexible. Supposing the impeachment had progressed or the 25th Amendment invoked, this would still have left Americans in the hands of Mike Pence, who, as Vice-President, has seconded each of Trump's steps. That he chose to stay in Capitol and certify Biden's win does not exonerate him from his responsibility in maintaining President Trump in power for four horrendous years. There should be a mechanism to call for new elections in case the US President behaves, as Trump has done, despicably. I will possibly eat my words if/when Joe Biden resigns and VP Kamala Harris becomes the first woman President of the USA, but it still seems to be anomalous that Americans are stuck with their choices for four years no matter what might happen.

Another issue I wish to raise is that of the Grand Old Party's complicity with Trump. The GOP or Republican Party elected him their candidate, whereas, please recall this for future reference, Hitler ran for Prime Minister supported by his own Nazi Party. Donald Trump seemed initially the kind of fringe figure that would try to enter US politics using his own platform (in the style of Kanye West's Birthday Party and the other third parties that backed independent candidates in the recent election). What is astonishing and disgusting is that the same Republican Party that backed Abraham Lincoln could back Donald Trump. I have not forgotten about Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, but in comparison to Trump they appear to be now excellent Presidents. It was even funny

to read Bush's press statement complaining that the USA are not a banana republic as the current incumbent at the White House believes, but also tragic. While democratic leaders all over the world worried how Trump's behaviour would inspire other right-wing populists, the right-wing populists in power mocked the ineptitude of their American colleague. The Republican Party, and particularly Trump sycophants such as Ted Cruz or the extremely dangerous Josh Hawley, are to blame for the brutal attack against democracy perpetrated by the Capitol rabble as much as Trump himself.

This leads me to the concept of 'the people' and Trump's argument that the closing down of his violence-mongering Twitter account is an attack against the right wing. The social media are not directly responsible for the possibly unsolvable political polarization of our times in all democracies because they were not created with that purpose. However, they are guilty of remaining passive as the fanatical political divide grew. Within democracy, there is room for the expression of diverging political views, but those views that threaten democracy itself, whether they are communist or fascist, need to be firmly rejected. Trump and his followers are using the classic Nazi argument in protecting extreme right-wing positions as a legitimate political stance but one thing is the democratic right and quite another the undemocratic extreme right. In that sense, all popular revolts that aim at invading Parliaments are undemocratic, hence intolerable and punishable by law. One thing is taking the Bastille to start a revolution against absolutist monarchy, and quite another taking the Capitol to deny the legitimate election of a new US President. The vandals assaulting the Capitol last Wednesday are not an expression of the American people, but its enemy, and so is Trump.

About the man himself, I'll just say that the scariest thing about him is that there could be someone even worse, by which I mean more intelligent. The biographical volumes *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success* (a.k.a *The Truth about Trump*) by Michael D'Antonio (2015) and *Too Much and Never Enough* (2020) by Mary Trump (Donald's niece and a reputed clinical psychologist) describe in all detail the sociopathic personality of this immature, self-loving man. Yet, as happens in Hitler's case, there is a major risk in stressing the singularity of an individual man whose rise is actually symptomatic of the society to which he appeals. Hitler rose with the complicity of the German upper classes at a time of profound economic crisis when the social anger of the disenfranchised masses had to be diverted away from Communism and given an outlet. Hitler was willing and able to play the role of German hero, to make Germany great again, and eventually escaped the control of his enablers, sinking the nation into chaos. Still, had he been unwilling and unable, I'm sure that some other messianic figure would have played the role, with the same or even worse consequences if that is conceivable. In Trump's case the GOP was responding to eight years of Obama's presidency, which exposed the deep racism of American society, and to a deep social fracture caused by the rampages of US capitalism amongst the less privileged segments of the white population. Trump was there to channel their grievances, despite being himself (supposedly) a key businessman, but, I insist, it could have been someone else, as shown by the number of ambitious men in the GOP biding his time as he falls. In short, you may send Trump to jail for life but what the USA needs is a much deeper structural change that prevents someone even worse from rising. For if he rises, the next assault against the Capitol will be carried out by fully armed militias that will not hesitate to execute the people's representatives. Just think how much worse last week's invasion could have been, perhaps the beginning of a second Civil War, in the hands of a more capable man.

Patriarchal villainy works, precisely in this way: it maintains a structure of power that is occupied by successive patriarchal men. The men themselves do not matter very much, and it is hopefully a sign of American patriarchy's decadence that it has been unable to single out a more intelligent man than the clownish Trump. What matters is the structure and how it connects with privilege, and the sense of entitlement of the already

privileged. In this case, please note that whereas Hitler came from the impoverished middle classes, Trump comes from American business aristocracy (though I insist that everything indicates he is not as rich as he claims). In that sense, democracy is just a slight deviation from the patriarchal norm stating that those with power rule but it is certainly preferable to any other system, if only because now and then it allows for genuine change. Of course, although I am calling the system 'patriarchy', we should not believe this is just an association of men—as we can see, there are now men and women on both sides of the democratic divide; the horrid thing is that the undemocratic women have been freed by feminism to express their undemocratic ideologies. For each Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez there is a 'Trump in heels', as State Senator Amanda Chase has described herself, though they are not democratic political equivalents: the former protects civil rights guaranteed by democracy, the latter does not.

I want to finish by appealing to the democratic right wing. I do not agree with your constant attempts to curb down personal freedom and to enable big business to rule our lives but democracy cannot be sustained without your firm defence. It is up to the Republican Party to regain lost honour and stop Trump and all other aspiring tyrants by impeaching him so that he can never hold office again, and it is likewise imperative to make sure that no other person like him will ever represent the GOP. The right wing should not oppose the democratic left wing but fight the undemocratic extreme right wing (as much as the undemocratic extreme left wing, of course). *The Washington Post* has been carrying since 2017 as its grim slogan 'Democracy dies in darkness', borrowed from journalist Bob Woodward, and this has almost happened in the nation that supposedly stands for the defence of democracy all over the world. Pearl Harbour and 9/11 were days that will live in infamy, but at least in those cases the enemy was external. 6 January 2021 will also live in infamy, but this time the enemy is inside and wants democracy to end. This is how patriarchal villainy operates and it is something that all honourable conservative politicians should acknowledge to protect fragile democracy from any aspiring patriarchal villain.

18 January 2021/ BORN-DIGITAL TEXTS AND ITS USES IN THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: AFTER A SYMPOSIUM

Last week I attended the symposium organized by Saskia Kersten (U. Hertfordshire) and Christian Ludwig (Frei U. Berlin) called "Born-Digital Texts and its Uses in the Foreign-Language Classroom", on which this post focuses. I first got in touch with Prof. Ludwig a while ago, when I replied to his cfp for the volume he has edited with Elizabeth Shipley, *Mapping the Imaginative II* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020). I have contributed to this volume the essay "Producing E-books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with University Students: Classroom Projects", which describes the process by which I have edited the first five volumes out of eight that I have published so far with students in the BA and MA English Studies degrees for which I work. The ninth e-book, on which I am now working, was the subject of my presentation. Funnily, I didn't know that these e-books are born-digital texts until I read the cfp for the symposium. Although there is not a total agreement on the definition of this concept, in principle a born-digital text is any type of text that is first created and circulates in a digital format, such as an e-book. The disagreements have to do with whether the born-digital texts can be made available in a non-digital form (an e-book can be printed as a book). However, once you know the concept, the idea is easy to grasp: many born-digital texts, from photos to hashtags, will remain digital and

will not be transferred to any analogical medium; even though some might, the label is still useful.

The general question asked in the symposium was how we should adapt the foreign-language classroom to make the most of the familiarity of our students with the diverse digital media. This is not, of course, a new question. It was first asked back in the 1990s when internet access was first made commercially available, and when other digital tools such as e-mail were introduced. The difference is that for some years now our students have been coming from the cohorts born after this time. There has been much talk about how those born from the mid-1990s onward are digital natives and it is indisputable that their lives are organized around digital platforms in ways that those of previous generations are not. Of course, as a symposium participant reminded me, we should not divide digital users along generational lines, but even though we can find many of these users in older generations, it seems obvious to me that any child or young person with no access to their generation's heavily digitalized environment runs a risk of becoming a social pariah. A participant mentioned how the lack of access to social media of less privileged children may become a problem in their future, when prospective employers check their networks and draw a blank. This is possibly already a problem for many of us—I'm sure that my empty accounts in Facebook and Instagram, my minimalist use of Twitter, and my absence from Linked In are inexplicable to many digital frequent users.

My approach to using digital media in the English Literature classroom remains sceptical, even though I am at the same time a staunch defender of that strategy. Of course, having taught online for the last two semesters I cannot say that the digital tools should have a minimal impact on the Literature classroom but, as I did in the symposium, I want to defend what I called the principle of reciprocity. By this I mean that I am very much concerned that many of the strategies described in the symposium and elsewhere are based on an academic surrender before the push of the social media and on the sad acceptance that some skills are being lost for good because students find them boring. That is to say, we, teachers that work with language from the primary school to university, seem to be giving up on the importance of two immensely important skills, reading and writing, in which we have a solid training; I mean of substantial texts, and not what young learners come across in the social media and, generally, online. I would agree that one can learn a foreign language on the basis of limited texts, and that not all learners should be expected to produce lengthy essays. However, as much as audiovisual media, from Netflix series to YouTube gamers' life play streaming, can help learners, their knowledge in this case of English is going to be limited without some intensive reading and without the ability to write beyond the 280 characters on Twitter. By this principle of reciprocity, then, I mean that I am willing to incorporate digital media to my classroom as long as students are willing to read and write at the demanding level that higher education and academic life requires.

I understand that my position is totally conditioned by the fact that I don't teach English language but English Literature, and I certainly see the point of adapting language teaching in primary and secondary school to other types of students than mine. The main point of the symposium, in a way, was to establish that learning English from print books, as it has been done so far is limiting—and here I mean both books written specifically to teach English but also fiction in English. I have no doubt whatsoever that the kind of exercise consisting of writing imaginary letters of complaint to a travel agency (which my 16-year-old niece showed me recently) has little reason to be in the current EFL classroom in comparison to producing a few minutes of narrated video to post on YouTube. Yet, perhaps a main problem is that attractive reading and writing has never been well integrated in English teaching, and little has been made of what students are actually reading. My colleagues and I have been told that in some secondary schools

Literature has been introduced in English classes in which students have an advanced command of English, but I have little idea (rather, none) of how that is being done. If it were up to me, I would have secondary school students produce booktubing videos in English, based on short fiction, or novels. Even long sagas, for, let's recall that YA fiction is usually published in trilogies or series, and consumed precisely by young readers sitting in high school classrooms.

Although I am explaining myself here very poorly, what I am trying to say is that what most worries me about the use of born-digital texts in the classroom inspired by social media, platforms like YouTube, gaming and so on is the lowering of educational standards. In my case, the e-books I have been producing with my students actually make higher demands on them since in my kind of project-oriented learning their written exercises are not simple classroom exercises but writing that needs to be ready for publication. As the participants in the symposium argued, there is indeed a barrier between the classroom and the outside online world in the sense that teachers and students are encouraged to integrate all digital media in learning but not to produce texts for it. One of the participants noted with undisguised bitterness that her university would not allow her to upload born-digital texts produced by her students, invoking matters of privacy and of authorship. Another noted that, indeed, authorship could be a problem but in my own university this has been solved by having students sign their permission to have their work uploaded onto our digital repository. With this I mean that there seems to be an important contradiction between having students bring to the classroom strategies of digital production and communication that they use in their private lives only to tell them that what happens in the classroom stays in the classroom. I find this very limiting. My approach has been, instead, that if we are to invite students to produce born-digital texts, then there must be a place for these to be visible; otherwise, the skills learned appear to be just part of assessment instead of part of an actual experience in communication at the level of actual real life.

In this sense, an interesting matter is how limited the production of videos for YouTube is in higher education (at least as far as my experience goes). I recently wrote an essay on Pat Frank's SF novel *Alas, Babylon* (1959) and I came across many videos produced by American high school children commenting on it, as this novel is apparently a set text in many schools. Good for them! In contrast, YouTube does not seem to attract much attention in higher education. I have tried several times to convince my colleagues to start a YouTube channel but nobody has the know-how, my university does not provide training and, since it is not a priority, I keep delaying the project. I naively assumed that all institutions of higher education had advanced YouTube channels but I must say that the panorama is quite pitiful. I'm sure that many university teachers keep their own channels but I see no systematic effort on the side of the universities to turn YouTube into a far more effective educational tool. By this I do not simply mean as a platform for teachers to deliver lectures and upload teaching materials but as a platform for students to contribute to generally available online knowledge, in a foreign language or in their own. I have not given up on the idea of opening a channel for my Department and I certainly have many ideas for it, but I just don't know enough about this medium, my younger colleagues are too busy having three jobs at the same time to help me, and we couldn't find among our 400 students any with experience as a booktuber, LifePlay gamer or similar. So much for digital natives!!! Again, my ambitions for the future YouTube channel is not that it might make learning easier or more fun, quite the opposite: I'd like to have students learn skills that can be applied to improving standards. Excuse me but it seems to me that fine as current booktubing is to circulate opinion and encourage reading, it is missing quality academic criticism and I fail to understand why this is not being provided by universities. If you follow me, then, I would not have students

imitate anyone but do a new job, which is right now vacant. Too ambitious, I know, but someone should do it.

This leads me to another concern that was voiced in the symposium: who should be responsible for the teachers' training in digital media? My impression is that all the participants were making an effort to apply their own knowledge to their teaching but that this knowledge had been acquired independently from their institutions. This always happens: the institution of learning, whether this is a primary school or a university, suddenly decides to introduce a new tool, but it is always up to the teachers to train themselves in it. This has recently happened with Teams in my university, chosen overnight to be our main platform for online teaching, but possibly starts with e-mail back in the 1990s. The problem is, then, not only that we should be making the most of digital platforms that in many cases we just don't know how to use (see my comments on YouTube) but also that these platforms' popularity changes enormously in time. Using Facebook as a teaching resource may have seemed a good idea just a few years ago, but it is now hopelessly old-fashioned. And by the time a teacher learns to use Tik-Tok, this will have been replaced by some other platform not even born today. From this perspective old-fashioned, non-digital materials appear to have a certain advantage.

Finally, I'll mention another matter that worries me: using born-digital texts can be time-consuming and not at all 'cost-effective'. My MA students have been producing narrated PowerPoints for our virtual classroom, and one of them decided to produce instead a video. It took him 15 hours to produce a 15-minute video. His efforts and the results were generally admired, but not more than some of the PowerPoints, which means that he invested in his born-digital text too much. There must be, then, a balance between the time invested and the learning results. Producing, for instance, videos for YouTube only makes sense as a tool to teach/learn language if the skills needed for that have been already acquired or take limited time to be acquired. And the other way round: the more proficient a teacher is in the process of producing born-digital texts with students, the lighter the task of producing them is (as I know from my already longish experience of editing e-books).

So, in short: the foreign-language classroom can be and should be at some levels a place for the production of born-digital texts but this process should contribute to enhancing the educational experience (not to trivializing it). It also needs to strike a balance between the time invested in mastering the digital skills and the time devoted to learning the language, which in the end is the main target. I would also insist that the activities need to be carried out in a spirit of reciprocity, with teachers learning from students' experiences in the digital media and students' willing to learn from teachers indispensable skills in reading and writing substantial texts.

Thanks Saskia and Christian for the great symposium!

25 January 2021/ THE NARRATIVE AND AESTHETIC PROBLEMS OF UTOPIA: RECONSIDERING ITS LACK OF APPEAL

Last week I had the great pleasure of participating in the seminar "El miedo y la esperanza: utopías y distopías en las artes y la cultura de masas" (Fear and hope: Utopias and Dystopias in the Arts and Mass Culture, within the Escola d'Humanitats run by the magazine *La maleta de Portbou*. I must thank Prof. Antonio Monegal for his invitation. It is not habitual in my hectic profession to be asked to debate ideas with others and after the seminar was over I felt immensely satisfied to have benefited from a great conversation lasting for six hours—what a luxury! I must note, incidentally, that the

seminar was originally programmed for March 2020 in Tarragona, but had to be delayed because of Covid-19. The meeting last week was moved to Barcelona but I must say that it became a hybrid event, with three of us participating from home and the rest in the La Caixa venue of Palau Macaya. The dystopia we are living in right now made it impossible for me to see my colleagues' faces, except for those online, as all were using facemasks. I don't how this will look in the future documentary film that is to come out of our meeting, particularly when this is seen once the pandemic is over, hopefully at the end of this dystopian year of 2021.

I tend to forget that Spanish academia favours an encyclopaedic approach in contrast to the argumentative discourse preferred by Anglo-American academia. Thus, whereas my own contribution—a discussion of Iain M. Bank's utopia the Culture—was focused on a single author and a novel series, my colleagues' contributions gathered together a great variety of titles, with possibly Iván Pastor's panorama of current comics being the most wide-ranging. This worked well since it allowed for abundant discussion among all of us also in a wide-ranging fashion which was, after all, the object of the seminar. The participants, I must note, were not only academics but also practising artists and writers (some also academics). I found it very refreshing to meet them, and I also felt awed, as I tend to feel a little silly discussing authors in front of other literary authors… (I refer here to Laura Fernández and José Ovejero).

I must note that my contribution was the only one exclusively focused on utopia, even though the seminar was supposed to deal with both utopia and dystopia. This is not at all a criticism of my colleagues' excellent talks but a way of stressing a major problem: the utopia/dystopia ratio works overwhelmingly in favour of the latter. At one point Prof. Monegal mentioned that IMDB mentions about 150 productions connected with utopia, but about 1500 related to dystopia; one to ten, then. The torrent of titles that came under discussion was, therefore, necessarily dystopian because this is what interests audiences—or, at least, what they are being offered by artists of all kinds. In fact, an issue that was raised is to what extent the insistence on the dystopian text is a capitalist ruse to keep all of us under control. A society that has no illusions about its future will not demand any changes and will most likely adapt to whatever little is offered in the way of social advances. At some point in the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s the very idea of a positive, brighter future was lost and without it there is very little that utopia can do to be appealing. Dystopia, in contrast, confirms again and again (or sells) the generalized impression that any utopia is necessarily misleading.

In my own contribution I insisted on a question that seems to me of great importance, namely, that utopia is never as easy to narrate as dystopia. Take, for instance, Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games*. At the end of the story an epilogue hints that the formerly dictatorial civilization of Panem has been rebuilt as a democratic nation, under the leadership of the former rebels. It would have been very interesting to narrate Katniss Everdeen's participation in that rebirth but Collins chose instead to involve Katniss in a plot twist that totally deprives her of any power she might have and that strands her in a domestic situation most of us judge to be just barely happy. Collins, of course, could have proceeded and narrate the building of a new utopia in a reformed Panem but instead she has published a rather dull novel about how tyrannical President Coriolanus Snow came to be: *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Indeed, most of Collins' readers expected her to go further back into the history of Panem and narrate how the United States became that dystopian monstrosity, which says plenty about the sad mood in the American nation. It is my personal opinion that we do not need more stories about the fall into dystopia that may ring prophetic, but new stories about how to build utopia beginning with current dystopia. They can be still full of incident and strife, and be exciting in its proclamation of a new beginning. I would agree, however, that narrating stories about utopia once this is in place might not be that thrilling. As Iain Banks

once explained, persons who live in a utopia can also experiment disappointment or conflict but whatever crisis you choose to narrate it would be just too similar to what you might find in the typical middle-class novel in which the social background is inexistent. This is why he preferred to narrate the clash between the utopian Culture and those less advanced civilizations that resisted its intervention.

Apart from the problem of its narrative limitations, utopia seems to have another significant problem of an aesthetic kind. This was made evident by Fito Conesa's observations about a series of rather kitsch utopian images which turned out to be propaganda for the Jehova's Witnesses. What he suggested is that any ideally pastoral image of happy people in a lovely environment makes us cringe rather than feel elated and I would attribute this cringeworthy effect to the steady undermining of beauty as an artistic category and of the sentimental in the current structure of feeling. Beauty, of course, is not gone as an aesthetic category but it is not something we actively seek in connection to the utopian future—we may admire the beauty of certain individuals or natural landscapes, but beauty is not at all connected with social living. When it is, as happens in the orbital for the very rich of the film *Elysium*, beauty is offered as a marker of privilege, not as a communal aspiration. In contrast, the ugly landscape of dystopia seems ubiquitous and even socially inescapable, a constant feature of the future because it is already a dominant feature of the present all over Earth. If a beautiful human-made, communal landscape appears in fiction, then you can be sure that it hides something behind, usually of a sinister nature (think of the film *The Island*).

Utopia, in short, is not cool either narratively speaking or in its aesthetics, whereas dystopia has managed to be cool both as a tale and in looks. How can this double handicap of utopia be counteracted? To be honest, I don't know, being neither a narrator nor an artist. One thing I can say, though: capitalism is infinitely flexible and it will certainly accommodate any utopia that is attractive to a significant number of people. If one day someone makes a truly good adaptation of a Culture novel by Iain Banks and the image of its utopia works well, that might start a new fashion. If it were in my power, I would go further and establish a well-endowed competition for utopian stories (though I would make it a condition that they are not separatist with, for instance, women-only civilizations or blacks-only civilizations, on the utopian principle that the elimination of prejudice should be paramount). Leaving aside the nightmare that Covid-19 currently is, I'm tired of that sinking feeling that dystopia produces, whether it comes from the daily reading of the news or the fantasies of depressing storytelling (ten seasons of *The Waking Dead*? Why?!).

One of the participants in the seminar, artist and academic María Ruido, complained that what most disgusted her is the habitual treatment of basic human rights as a utopia, in the sense of something unfeasible. She worries, most rightly, that the Covid-19 crisis will further undermine any social protest and will even push back the achievements of the last decades as regards workers' rights and women's rights. María and I stressed that the utopias behind these rights—Communism, feminism—have not been fully developed but should be given some room in any utopia to be. I believe that feminism is currently the only functional utopia in the sense that all women, even the non-feminists, are motivated by the idea that our future must necessarily be better until it is truly good. The many strong female characters in fiction and the many bold women in real life model their lifestyles on this utopian aspiration (whereas men wander lost in the now decadent patriarchal dystopia). In contrast, what has become almost taboo is any discussion of work and by this María and I meant something quite similar: not just the appalling lack of quality of most occupations but also the enormous amount of time that work takes.

Between 1820 and 1920 the average working hours went from 76 a week to 42, but in the last 100 years nothing has been done to reduce our weekly toil from 40 to 30

or less. We are told again and again that this would bring chaos, with more unemployment, lower pay rates, etc. but it just seems impossible to believe that productivity remains the same as in 1920. Something needs to be done and change demanded. The utopia espoused by 1970s radical feminism as regards the family had to do with this, precisely: the domestic model defended was a household in which each member worked no more than four hours a day, so that there was sufficient time to raise children and enjoy leisure of a constructive, active kind. Instead, we work very long hours, with more instability than ever and with hardly any chance of truly reconciling work with private life. Any attempt to reverse this trend is immediately branded communist agitation and dismissed as an afront to common sense. Thus capitalism thrives and utopia dies, while we consume as if there is no tomorrow the dystopian tales that capitalism itself sells to us.

Let's create, then, utopia anew, for the sake of the future, with uplifting tales and pleasure in beauty.

2 February 2021/ THE DAY I WATCHED 50+1 MUSIC VIDEOS: A NEGLECTED PLEASURE

One of my BA dissertation tutorees has asked me to work on Childish Gambino's fascinating, controversial music video ["This is America"](#) (2018) and I'm happy to have the chance of returning to a film genre that I neglect too much. Ages ago (or so it seems), I published the essay "El cuerpo en el videoclip musical: Más que carne fresca" (in Meri Torras (ed.), *Corporizar el pensamiento: Escrituras y lecturas del cuerpo en la cultura occidental*. Pontevedra: Mirabel, 2006. 175-194), which came from a seminar on the same topic which I taught at UAB. I will always remember a hilarious moment in it. I had decided to debate with students The Prodigy's video for the song "Smack My Bitch Up" (1997). I had more than a little distaste for the lyrics (just a monotonous repetition of "Change my pitch up!/ Smack my bitch up!") but the video directed by Jonas Åkerlund is still one of my favourites. It narrates from a first person point of view a riotous night in London, with plenty of booze, drugs, and sex. The spectator assumes that the invisible protagonist behind the camera must be a man but the big final reveal is that this is actually a young woman. When I walked into the room, I saw that one of the students was an elderly lady and, ageist me, I worried that she might be scandalized. Funnily, when the video was over, she raised her hand and asked me very eagerly "can you play it again, please?" Everyone laughed.

I wrote a few years later another article on a music video, "Unstable meanings, unstable methods: Analysing Linkin Park's song 'What I've Done'" (José Ramón Ibáñez Ibáñez & José Francisco Fernández Sánchez (eds.), *A View from the South: Contemporary English and American Studies.* Almería: Editorial Universidad de Almería, 2011. 150-157), in which I showed how even when a song is popular there can be very little agreement on what it actually means. The song appears to deal with a man's regrets about his past misbehaviour, either because he has been a drug addict or because he has been abusive in a relationship, or both. In contrast, the video directed by one of Linkin Park's members, Joe Hahn, shows the band playing in the desert with the performance intercut with a montage of documentary images, mostly showing the conflicts in which the USA have been involved. Chester Bennington's passionate singing changes radically depending on what you decide the song is about: a heart-felt apology from a single man speaking for himself perhaps to a woman, or a heart-felt apology by an American man

ashamed of his nation and asking the world for forgiveness. And this just because some images were added to a performance in the music video.

Back to my student. She is also taking a Practicum with me consisting of doing academic activities connected with Literature and Culture. Since the actual content is very open, I have employed her so far as my research assistant for my MA course on gender in animated children's fiction and will employ her now producing a guide of the best American music videos of the 21st century (for online publication on UAB's digital repository and under her name, not mine). This is for two reasons: one, I think that working on other music videos will enhance her understanding of Gambino's video for her BA dissertation; two, I very much wanted to learn from a much younger person about the current state of the music video. There are always lists of the best at the end of the year and, inevitably, I stumble upon this or that music video on YouTube or browsing the international press. I must say that, unfortunately, I seem to have lost my former passion for pop and rock, which lasted until I became incapable of working with the music on and found listening to it outside working hours incompatible with the lots of reading I need to do. Besides, I could never accomplish the transition from the album to the Spotify list, without which following the ups and downs of current music styles is hard enough. I know, more or less, who is who but if asked to name ten great songs of the last decade I would be lost. Yes, quite sad—perhaps I should teach a course and get back on track!

I agreed with my tutoree that she would select 50 great music videos of the 21st century and then we could decide how to write about them for the guide. She sent me the selection last week and I spend a few wonderful hours on Saturday enjoying a list if not of the best at least of the very good music videos which the past two decades have given us. My student has mostly chosen elegant, well-made videos that illustrate great songs by a notable variety of US performers. I'm not going to comment on the list itself (I keep that for when she publishes the guide) but I will say that, as she and I know, all lists are bound to be very personal even when the person making the selection tries to be as open-minded as possible. Everyone has favourites and in the immense world of popular music there is no way two persons can agree on what is best. It is, besides, very hard to say in which ways a music video is a quality work, for, surely, some great videos corresponding to not so popular songs must pass unnoticed, whereas other videos get noticed just for the song, not because the video has any filmic values. Surely, the video for Luis Fonsi's hit "Despacito" has no special values as a film, despite being the second most played video on YouTube ever (behind "Baby Shark"!). Even worse, some music videos have become extremely popular for very wrong reasons, and I'm thinking here of the exploitative images in Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines".

This leads to me to video number 51—"WAP". My student did not include it in her selection but "WAP" is no doubt the most talked about music video of 2020. Here are some notes. "WAP" is a song published by New York rapper Cardi B (born Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar in 1992) featuring Texan rapper Meghan thee Stallion (Megan Jovon Ruth Pete, b. 1995). The song, which mixes hip hop, dirty rap, and trap, deals quite explicitly with sexual matters, with both artists singing and rapping about women's sexual preferences and their expectations regarding men's performance during sex ('wap' incidentally is an acronym for 'wet-ass pussy'). "WAP" was generally well-received for its expression of female sexual agency but its dirty lyrics were also a source of enormous controversy, with some criticizing them for their vulgar language. There was quite a backlash from conservative politicians (i.e. Trumpian Republicans) who even asked for some form of censorship, though their complaints mostly helped "WAP" to become an even more popular hit. Most progressive media outlets defended Cardi B's raunchy song as an expression of black female empowerment through popular American culture's reverence for the rebellious artist.

The [music video](), directed by the extremely experienced Collin Tilley but with plenty of input from Cardi B herself, made the controversy even more vivid, with figures such as British comedian Russell Brand arguing that there was little difference between pornographic sexualization by men and the supposedly self-empowering presentation of the women in it. The video shows Cardi B and Meghan thee Stallion, dressed in sexy outfits by *haute couture* designers (Nicolas Jebran, Thierry Mugler), walking in an extravagant mansion full of powerful women similarly dressed. The imagery uses plenty of animal print decorations and psychedelic colours in the style of Willie Wonka's factory. A pool scene offers a sensual dance routine (by JaQuel Knight) imitated countless times on TikTok. The video features non-singing cameos by Kylie Jenner, Normani, Rosalía, Mulatto, Rubi Rose, and Sukihana, all contributing to enhancing the representation of female power. The video was celebrated, like the song, and soon hailed as one of the best of 2020, if not the best. However, beyond its sexiness, the video became a source of criticism for its use of live animals (with big cats appearing as pets for rich women) and for the presence of white celebrity Kylie Jenner. Cardi B defended her choice, arguing that race should not be a consideration (Jenner has been often accused of appropriating black culture) and that Kim Kardashian's sister also appears as her personal friend.

There is an immense difference between Gambino's "This is America" and Cardi B's "WAP" but both have something in common: they are a wonderfully compressed representation of a rich bunch of interconnected issues, and require a savvy audience to make sense. I understand why my student is interested in the former far more than in the latter. Gambino's issues, focused on racial discrimination in the USA, seem to be far more serious socially speaking than Cardi B and Meghan thee Stallion's hymn to the hyperactive vagina. Yet, each knows its audience very well. Gambino throws one allusion after another to events every black person in the USA should be able to identify whereas Cardi B appeals to those who follow the ins and outs of celebrity culture and of black female empowerment in the American music circuit. If you don't know any of the celebrities appearing in the video, you will be mystified—though I remain mystified about why Rosalía accepted appearing in a sort of torero outfit without singing at all. Kylie Jenner's presence is not, in my view, insulting in racial terms but because unlike Rosalía she is no artist and Cardi B hardly needs her to endorse her own art. Gambino, by the way, appears naked from the waste up in his film but this is not intended as a sexy display of his quite sexy anatomy. In contrast, Cardi B and her colleague Meghan display their curves in all their glorious abundance. In one of the scenes Cardi B's breasts are quite visible, even though the nipples are covered, and this is when, like Russell Brand, I did doubt whether this was empowerment or self-exploitation. My own idol, Kylie Minogue, has found much more classy ways of being her own woman—and no, this is not prudery but a certain tiredness after seeing women claim power by showing their bodies for the last thirty five years, since Madonna started the trend. I recall dealing with the exact same issue in my 2006 article regarding a video with Jennifer Lopez…

See? These tiny films, lasting on average 3 minutes, are food for thought in ways much longer films are not. Half advertisement, half art the music video still survives and, from what I see in my 50+1 songs exploration, has a great future ahead. I'll make sure to be more alert to it.

This post is intended to be a sort of 'making of' of the new e-book I have edited and which has been written by the students in my MA course on Gender Studies this past semester. It is my ninth project of that kind (see the full list here). These e-books gather together short essays, and in some cases longer papers or brief factsheets, written by students as part of their assessment but mainly with a view to online publication. The new e-book is called *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema* and it can be downloaded for free here. I have also uploaded onto the digital repository of my university a narrated PowerPoint corresponding to the symposium presentation "Collaborative authorship: Publishing E-Books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with BA and MA students", which more or less repeats what I describe here (but with illustrations!). This is what I presented at the meeting on born-digital texts to which I referred a few posts ago.

I started publishing e-books with students both in the BA and the MA degrees in English Studies because my university, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, invited all teachers to take advantage of the possibilities open by the digital repositories inaugurated in 2006. In 2013-14 I taught a course on *Harry Potter* for which I asked my students to write a brief essay about their experience of reading the series. When I saw that the essays had quality and interest I put together a volume which I published online in the digital repository. Then I put together a second volume with the academic papers written to obtain the course grade. These were my first two publications with students, in this case fourth-year BA students in the degree in English Studies, with a C1 to C2 command of English. Next, in 2015, I published a volume gathering together work written for a fourth year BA course on Gender Studies, including again personal essays and papers. I published a second volume a few years later, in 2018.

In the previous four publications I had worked with quite large groups of about 40 BA students. For the next two, *Reading Sf Short Fiction: 50 Titles* and *Gender in 21st Century SF Cinema*, I worked with much smaller groups. The science-fiction short fiction guide was written by only 15 BA students enrolled in an elective monographic fourth-year course on this genre. The e-book about gender in sf cinema was written by just 8 MA students in my Gender Studies course, with a similar C1 to C2 level. This is the minimum number this kind of project needs as each of the students had six films in their hands, which also meant six essays for the e-book of about 1500 words each. Of course, I could have chosen to cover less than 50 films, but this is quite a nice number if you want to cover minimally an extensive field. My two most recent projects before the new e-book were *Frankenstein's Film Legacy*, written by a group of second year BA students with a lower B2 to C1 level, and *Focus on the USA: Representing the Nation in Early 21st Century Documentary Film* written by a group of 4th year BA students. This e-book is the most complex publication I have edited so far because I was not familiar myself with about 50% of the films and I had to learn about them as I taught the course. It is also a very long volume, with 90 essays.

All these e-books, published as .pdf files, are available for free from the digital repository of my university. They have generated together more than 22,000 downloads in six years, from a long list of nations all over the world. The most successful one is the short fiction guide which accounts for about 40% of the downloads, and seems to be particularly popular in the United States. I cannot explain its success except that it appears to be the most practical of the e-books I have published with students.

The last e-book has been written by 13 MA students of diverse nationalities (Spanish, American, Chinese, Vietnamese, Italian) who have produced excellent work analysing how animated children's cinema deals with gender issues. The novelty of the

e-book and of the course is that unlike what is habitual in academic work it does not focus on a single animation studio. I did read in preparation for the course the two books by Amy Davis on Disney and another book by Shannon Wooden and Ken Gillam on Pixar. There are, however, no academic books yet on studios such as DreamWorks, Laika, Illumination, Blue Sky and so on. In contrast the e-book includes films by all these and others. The films are in any case all of them English-language films mostly made in the United States because they have been studied in an English Studies degree.

It was by no means easy to focus just on 50 titles, the maximum a small MA group can cover, even though it was my criterion to work only on 21st century films. I am myself a keen spectator of that kind of animated film so I relied on my previous knowledge of the genre to organise the course. Even so, I went through many lists of the best, taking into account that the films should also be interesting from a gender issues perspective. However, I must say there I discarded very few on those grounds for, as my students found out, all films for children implicitly address gender issues. An annoying problem was that many of the films made now have sequels and I found it very difficult to focus just on the first film and disregard the sequels. Perhaps I should have done that but I decided that taking a look at the franchises made sense to see precisely how gender evolved in them, or not at all.

Generally speaking, from the first film, *Monsters Inc* (2001) to the last, *Onward* (2020), there has been a general improvement in the treatment of gender though within a rather conservative pattern. Again generally speaking, the female characters are better represented, with many more strong, independent girls and women. Nevertheless, the influence of the Disney Princess stereotype still persists, even in films that try to opposite it openly. Besides, most films addressed to children have male characters as protagonists, even though it is by no means true that men or boys are always positively represented. The other matter that we established is that most animated films addressed to children are stubbornly heteronormative. There were hints that some characters could be gay or lesbian but only in *Onward*, that is to say last year, did we come across an openly LGBTI+ character, who has, it must be noted, a very minor role. So, on the whole the treatment of gender issues has improved but very slowly and we hope that the pressure put on the studios after the #MeToo campaigns and others will help to make animated children's films generally more progressive and closer to what the march of gender progress demands.

For those who might be interested, this is how I taught the course. I used two of the ten teaching weeks for an introduction to Gender Studies and to animation, based on four 90' lectures. Then I used the rest of the eight weeks for students' class presentations of the gender issues in each film, with two to four 15' presentations per session, apart from a teacher's mini-lecture also of about 15'. I offered students a sample presentation, and I myself participated in the course as one more student. Each of us had four films in our hands. When we had to move online because of Covid-19, I kept the same format, though instead of streaming live presentations we used narrated PowerPoints that were later commented on in the corresponding forum. I don't know whether this was the effect of certain competitiveness but the PowerPoints were in some cases simply spectacular. All students did much more than I asked them for. I must say that if the course had been run face-to-face it would have been impossible to deal with all the material that they uploaded after we went online, with most presentations running to 20 minutes instead of 10 to 15, as I had initially asked. The presentations were intended to be a draft of the essay that students later submitted; this was based on my own sample essay (including credits, film poster, three reasons why the film is interesting, a 1500-word essay). In total we covered 57 films, so the e-book contains 57 essays. I encouraged students to use for both the presentations and for the essays three secondary sources, including film reviews and academic secondary sources. Luckily, this time I had a research assistant

helping all of us to find bibliography. We have found some academic work for most of the pre-2010 films but not so much for the more recent films, hence the importance of the film reviews.

I must note that I corrected in depth the essays, handed in two weeks after each presentation, but I did not grade them yet. If they were good enough, I accepted them for publication; if they required revision I returned them for a second draft, to be delivered one week before the final grades were due. That was the case with about 30% of the essays. This might surprise some but I asked students to self-assess: 50% of the final grade came from the essays, 30% from the presentations, and 20% from the forum contributions, that is to say the questions they asked their classmates. All assessed themselves fairly, though I upgraded some marks after going through the revised essays. Once I gathered the 57 essays together (216 pages, 105000 words), I spent about 35 hours revising them for the final publishable version, with most of that time used to correct the second versions of the essays for which I had asked students to rewrite.

I didn't ask students to see all the films and I have not checked or valued in any way how many they did see, but I assume from their comments that they were familiar directly with at least half (in some cases more, in others less). Regarding the approach to Gender Studies, I have allowed students to express their own views and ideas freely. I am myself a feminist specialised in Masculinities Studies but I have not imposed on my students a single criterion (at least, I hope I have not done that). In any case, rather unified criteria emerged from classroom discussion with very little discrepancy, perhaps because the films are on the whole rather conservative, as I have noted, and they were quite easy to analyse and criticise. The students were clearly much more progressive and advanced in their understanding of gender than the studio executives.

I am extremely proud of my students' great work. Thank you Rubén Campos, Manu Díaz, Cristina Espejo, Silvia Gervasi, Maria Guallar, Naiara López, Jessiah Mellott, Raquel Prieto, Alba Sánchez, Thu Trang Tran, Jamie Wang, Ting Wang and Helena Zúñiga for a wonderful experience in the midst of a hard time that seems hardly the best for doing good academic work. I hope your e-book is immensely successful!

15 February 2021/ RETHINKING LITERARY CRITICISM: SEEKING A NEW BALANCE

Blogger Jim Harmon left a comment on my post "Theorizing Character: A Few Pointers", recommending an article on characters published in *The Guardian* by James Wood: "A Life of Their Own". I didn't know who Woods is: a major literary critic employed in publications such as *The Guardian* itself, *The New Republic*, and currently *The New Yorker* magazine (he's also a part-time associate professor at Harvard). As it turns out, Wood is the author of a best-selling non-academic volume, *How Fiction Works* (2008, 2019) which can be said to be the heir to E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). The article on characters published in *The Guardian* is actually a central part of Wood's volume, and a continuation of Forster's discussion of characters as flat or round, among other matters. My focus, however, is not character today but literary criticism. The date seems, besides, particularly appropriate, as Prof. J. Hillis Miller, who did so much to introduce deconstructionism decades ago, has just passed. I would define deconstructionism as the last gasp of traditional literary criticism before the total dominance of the literary theory which it helped to introduce from 1990 onward.

Wood's volume is a deliciously old-fashioned study, devoid of all theory, about how realist fiction works. The title of the book is, actually, incorrect because even though there are some comments on what we habitually call genre fiction, Wood is only

interested in realism. He adamantly denies that this is a genre, as many including myself claim, even though I remain more convinced than ever after reading his volume that realism is indeed a genre dealing with the life crises of mainly middle-class characters living in contexts identifiable as historically accurate or representing the mundane present. Wood says that no realist novel needs to mention Trump and that gives you an idea of what he means: in realist fiction, the socio-political reality that so interested 19th century novelists is missing, to the point that I wonder whether Covid-19 will ever feature in it. Realism of the kind Wood loves functions as if referring to issues beyond the characters' personal lives is in bad taste. A problem, as Wood notes, is that since writers themselves have started being bored by the inner life of the average individuals often described in realist fiction, they have started moving towards more overtly autobiographical fiction, even half-abandoning the fictional. But I digress.

The question that seems to confuse the study of realism is that part of the definition of the genre is the use of literary prose and the foregrounding of form over plot. This is, I think, a direct consequence of dealing with the minute events of life as it is on planet Earth: you need to make matters interesting from an artistic point of view or risk alienating your reader out of pure boredom. A novel about nothing, as Flaubert wanted to write, needs to rely on a solid linguistic artistry and narrative technique to engage readers' attention, whereas a plot-driven novel can do away with literary prose and formal experimentation because the point of engagement, so to speak, is provided by what happens.

Take, for instance, a detective novel. This genre is 100% realist in the sense that, unless supernatural elements intervene, the detective works against a background that readers accept as a representation of real life. Indeed, many detective fiction works are successful not so much because of the case they explore but because of the description of the social and geographical background (yes, I'm thinking of Nordic noir, or of Tartan noir). The best detective fiction is as good as any realist novel (using Wood's vocabulary) at using free indirect style, strong characterization, plenty of details based on good powers of observation and so on. The main difference is that detective fiction writers do not use prose full of artistic literary elements (though I have thought here immediately about classic US noir's invention of hard-boiled dialogue). I am not saying that detective fiction cannot be literary like the works of, say, Vladimir Nabokov; what I am saying is that if it is literary this is an added element and not part of the core of the genre. Readers, in short, do not read detective fiction for the literariness of the prose and any experiments in narrative structure but this does not mean that no novel in this genre is literary. I would say the opposite: that the best genre novels enter the particular genre canon because of their literary values. No reader loves a poorly written novel.

Wood, in contrast, focuses on a long selection of realist writers, from Miguel de Cervantes to Ali Smith, to lovingly enthuse about the beauties of their literary achievements in selected passages from their books. His clever, insightful, theory-free application of close reading is truly enjoyable and I hadn't realized I was missing this so much until I read his little volume. I was reminded, above all, of Erich Auerbach's classic *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (*Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 1946), which I read as an undergrad student in the 1980s. By the way, Wood notes that his book is being used as a handbook in many university courses but I have my doubts about its usefulness, simply because most of the literary authors he mentions (the canon complemented by a 21st century selection) might be unknown to undergrad students. Part of the value of Wood's book comes from enjoying analyses of literary classics (or prestige new fiction) one is already familiar with, and as an introduction it can be a bit overwhelming for someone who has never heard of Thomas Mann or Karl Ove Knausgaard. But I digress again…

Wood does pay attention to detail, and does it amazingly well, because he can do it. He is, after all, a literary critic working in the media, whereas we, scholars, are no longer allowed to produce literary criticism but just theory-framed issue analysis. I have always argued that all types of fiction need to be subjected to the type of illuminating close reading that Wood offers for literary fiction because only good textual criticism can help a genre progress. If we only focus on the plot elements or on the identity politics affecting characterization then we end up encouraging a type of writing that, while satisfactory on those fronts, is weak as literature. Beyond the type of story you enjoy, you need to be demanding about the quality of its writing; that seems pretty obvious to me. I love science-fiction, as I have noted countless times here, but this doesn't mean that I am willing to put up with bad writing.

In fact, now that I am reading lots of science-fiction novels, for reasons that I will eventually explain, I am getting really fed up with the sloppiness dominating the genre today. Ursula K. Le Guin was a marvellous writer (and I can say that having read also all her realistic short stories) but many of the writers I am going through these days are either awful or, in the best cases, pedestrian. There seems to be, besides, a regrettable divide between the good prose writers and the good plot-makers. Lavie Tidhar writes lovely literary prose but his *Central Station* has no story. Everyone loves the space opera series *The Expanse* by James S.A. Corey but, though the plot is thrilling enough, I fail to be excited by the lack of authorial insight into the characters and the flat dialogue which is never conversation. Nobody, however, among my science fiction colleagues is commenting on these matters, as if proper literary criticism was taboo (that is left for the formidably clever readers in GoodReads and the media reviewers).

Intriguingly, Wood partly undermines his argumentation about the intrinsic difference between realism and the so-called narrative genres when he writes that realism, "seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are" (205), goes beyond verisimilitude to be what he calls "lifeness": "life brought to different life by the highest artistry" (206). He insists that this is the reason why realism cannot be a genre, yet at the same time Wood claims that lifeness is what allows the genres to exist, from magical realism to the western. The novelist, he says, must always "act as if the available novelistic methods are continually about to turn into mere convention and so has to try to outwit that inevitable ageing" (206). There is plenty to unpack here but in essence two ideas emerge: a) if an impression of lifeness is a mark of the best fiction, there is no reason why it should not be found beyond the novel of everyday life, as long as the writer is willing to employ the "highest artistry"; b) if lifeness allows all genres to exist, there is no reason to think of realism as a strand of fiction apart from all genres (in fact, I don't quote understand the idea that some kind of fiction has no genre for all fiction obeys generic conventions). In short, any novel of any type can be literary if the writer displays the "highest artistry" and all novels of all types aspire to tricking the readers into accepting that what they are reading is a slice of life of the context chosen for representation. When we read *The Lords of the Rings*, we get carried away by the illusion of life that Tolkien conjures up for us, even though we know very well that Hobbits do not exist. When we read Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* we enjoy the same magical trick but from another angle. That Tolkien's Middle-earth has never existed but Hugo's France has is irrelevant, or, if you wish, a matter of the reader's preferences. What matters is that both books are great works of fiction full of lifeness.

Seeking a more formal approach to science fiction, I ended up reading Peter Stockwell's *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (2000), a volume that tries to undermine the type of subjective, impressionistic criticism that critic-reviewers like Wood produce by offering a scientific approach based on stylistics and cognitive linguistics. Whereas Wood is after a certain notion of beauty, admiring the writer's personal ability to manipulate prose for his/her ends, Stockwell takes a whole genre to explore how it works at a macro

level. His assumption is that if you map the linguistic and stylistic resources that a genre uses, then you will be able to say whether a particular text uses them well, beyond offering a personal opinion. It is a commendable position, but also one that forgets that writing fiction is an art, not a scientific endeavour. You can apply all the mathematics in the world to explain why Michelangelo's David is so beautiful, but this will just result in an extremely limited impression of its appeal. Likewise, you may describe in all detail, as Stockwell does, all the types of metaphor used in science fiction and how readers understand worldbuilding but this doesn't explain why Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) hit such a raw nerve when it was published and why it has become such a huge classic. In a way deconstruction came about to bridge the gap between impressionistic personal criticism and this new brand of objective stylistic criticism to re-introduce formalism, which had been already all the vogue in the early 20th century. In the end, though, literary theory has bridged no gap but left us with no guiding compass to truly read the texts.

You might think I am exaggerating but I am reading these days plenty of academic writing in which textual analysis has practically disappeared under a tremendous barrage of secondary sources, and in which building a theoretical frame matters more than introducing the author. Wood's book has made my discomfort with this practice more nagging than usual, and I am wondering why I never see any analyses of the beauties of genre fiction, which are many. I do not agree that genre fiction should be the subject of clinical description, as Stockwell proposes. And the other way round: possibly only 10% of all genre fiction can sustain literary analysis in Wood's style. But how about downplaying the role of theory and of identity politics, and looking at how texts are actually written? How about expressing more appreciation for how the writers we admire do what they do with words? I'm not asking for a return to pure formalism, but for a better grasp of writing itself and for a celebration in all genres—including realism—of that elusive thing Wood calls lifeness. It seems to me that is the very reason why we love reading fiction, whether as plain readers or as professional academics.

23 February 2021/ LET ME COUNT THE BOOKS…: PIERRE BAYARD'S *HOW TO TALK ABOUT BOOKS YOU HAVEN'T READ*

Allow me to begin by venting my massive annoyance with the new platform which my university has chosen to keep track of our academic activities, as if ORCID, Academia.edu, and my own webpage were not enough. I have spent two and a half complete working days trying to make sense of its user-unfriendly approach to my CV, which I keep as tidy as a work of art (after all, it covers 30 years of my life). Apart from delaying the writing of this post and all my other activities, the platform has given me a terrible headache, enhanced by my realization that I will need at least four more complete working days, if not more, to put everything in its place. In the process, by the way, I have discovered that Scopus only registers one of my publications, when the real figure, leaving aside what I have self-published, is about 100. If I have to enter everything again there, I'll scream!!! I'm fed up with the co-existence of so many platforms and their general lack of intercommunication.

My topic today is not that, however, but a delicious book by Pierre Bayard, the French scholar and psychoanalyst. I have read his volume *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus?* (2007) in its Catalan translation by David Clusellas i Codina, and my first observation needs to be that in this and in the English translation the final interrogation mark has been lost. What was a query becomes a statement, which is curious to say the least. Apart from the books we have read and know well, Bayard refers

to four categories of books: the ones we don't know, the ones we have skimmed, the ones we have heard of, and the ones we have forgotten. I'm using here the table of contents of the English translation (by Jeffrey Mehlman), though I remain mystified by category two. The French original refers to 'Les livres que l'on a parcourous' and I don't know sufficient French to be sure that 'skimmed' is a good translation ('parcour' means to travel); the Catalan translator has chosen 'fullejat' ('fuilleter' in French) which could be translated as 'leaf through'. In my own reading practice I have never leafed through any book; this is a word I might connect to a magazine or a coffee table book, but not a volume with no illustrations. I was, therefore, totally confused by what Bayard meant until I simply accepted that he does indeed leaf through books he is not too keen on reading.

Please, recall that Bayard teaches Literature at the University of Paris VIII. Although I suspect that the whole volume is written very much tongue-in-cheek, I remain surprised by his willingness to openly declare that he often speaks in class of books he has not read—as his students do. I may have spoken of books I have not read in the context of giving information about an author's oeuvre but I swear that I have never ever discussed a book I have not read at least twice. I agree with Bayard that many of my students discuss in their exercises books they have never read, and I once had a major incident with a gentleman who casually commented in another course that he had never read any of the books in mine despite having obtained an A. Instead of failing him retrospectively, as I could do, I called him to my office for him to explain to me how he did it, and that was a very interesting meeting. However, I simply cannot imagine what kind of teaching can emerge from a classroom in which absolutely nobody, including the teacher, has read the book under analysis. Bayard claims that is the best possible situation to produce something new and creative but, again, I think he jokes.

One matter in which I do find that he seems more serious is his declaration that (quoting the English translation) "Being cultivated is a matter not of having read any book in particular, but of being able to find your bearings within books as a system, which requires you to know that they form a system and to be able to locate each element in relation to others". If you read ten introductions to Victorian Literature there comes a moment in which you might be able to speak reasonably about the Victorian novel without having read any. If you add to this the Sparknotes summaries then you can pass as a true lover of Victorian fiction. The question, however, is why would you want to do that? It is very unlikely that you would find another person interested in a conversation about Victorian fiction who was also passing him/herself as a reader, so why pretend? I don't think I could have a minimally intelligible conversation about, say, Italian 19th century fiction, just by being familiar with the main names and titles in a context in which the other person supposed I was a reader of that type of fiction. For me, the knowledge of the book system to which Bayard refers is a process of filling in the blanks, though I confess that to this day I am not sure how many Victorian novels you should have read before qualifying to teach Victorian Literature. I have teaching that for almost 30 years now and, obviously, when I started I had only read a tiny fraction of the Victorian novels I have read now. A list, that anyway, still seems pitifully short to me.

So, my rule number one so far: don't speak of books you have not read as if you knew them well, for, regardless of what students may think, your not having read them does show. Regarding the books we leaf through, or skim, I must say that now that I think about it there is a type of book I do leaf through: academic books, when I need a quotation for one of my articles. We would all lie if we claimed that we read the academic books we quote from beginning to end, it is simply not the case. I would not leaf through a novel, though, and if I start skimming then this is a sign that my energies are flagging and I am about to abandon the book. I have recently abandoned a 450 page novel around page 320, or as my e-book reader indicates, around 2:30 hours away from the end. I just could not go on, even though my usual rule is that past the 50% mark I must finish. This poses

a problem, which Bayard does tackle: he argues that the unfinished book should count as a read book, whereas I tend not to add the unfinished volumes to the list of books I have read (I do keep a list, this is literal not metaphorical). Since I have recently abandoned about half a dozen novels, my list looks pitiful this month, as if I have somehow failed. I have even considered keeping a separate list of unfinished books, but this seems going too far. I see many readers posting reviews in GoodReads in which they do acknowledge they never finished the book under review. They make a point that if an author fails to interest them sufficiently that is part of the process of reading and, hence, of reviewing. This sounds fine to me for a platform like GoodReads but, again, rule number two, I would never teach a book I have not finished, or discuss it academically.

An even more tantalizing concept than that of the unfinished book is the forgotten book. Bayard explains in a wonderful chapter that Montaigne did not know how to tackle the problem of his forgetfulness as a reader until he hit on the system of making a note on the final page naming the date when he had finished the book and adding his opinion. Montaigne, nonetheless, discovered eventually that the method did not work at all; additionally, he felt as if his opinions were someone else's. I started keeping a list of all I read when I discovered that I had re-read a book I had already read but forgotten. Even with the list, I've had some incidents of that kind. And when at the end of each year I go through the list for the last twelve months I inevitably discover one or two books I have already forgotten.

My good friend Bill Phillips has a wonderful capacity to recall the plots of the many novels he reads months after he read them, but my memory is rather mediocre in that sense and I can only recall in detail the books I teach or have written about. These are books that, please recall, I have read at least twice, in some cases ten or more times. This means that I recall having read particular books and having generally enjoyed them or not, but I can only remember specific details if I make notes. From Bayard's perspective, this means that my whole reading experience consists mainly of books I have forgotten, which might well be the case. I have the impression, besides, that the more I read the more I forget as if my brain were a hard disk with a limited capacity. I don't know if this is the same for all readers, as we hardly speak about these matters in my academic circle, or with my students.

The other book I'm reading these days, Jo Walton's *What Makes This Book So Great* (2014), is a collection of blog posts which she wrote commenting on the science fiction and fantasy she was re-reading for the website Tor.com. Walton does not speak of re-reading as a cure against forgetfulness but as a re-encounter with characters she values as friends. I do not re-read much because, like many other readers, I feel that life is too short to read the same book more than once. I must acknowledge, though, than when I re-read a book I need to teach or write about the pleasure is always bigger the second time around, or even the third. In the case of the two novels I have recently written about (Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*) I only truly loved them in the third reading—not because they are not good books but because I wasn't paying enough attention. It occurs to me now that I actually choose the books I write about when I implicitly accept that I would like to re-read them, and the other way round: a book I don't want to re-read is, most definitely, one I don't want to teach or analyse. Walton, going back to her book, is Bayard's direct opposite, for instead of speaking of books she does not know, she speaks of books she knows very intimately and to which she returns regularly. I believe this is how it should be done.

So, to sum up, as much as I loved reading Bayard's book, I would not speak of books I have not read. If someone tells me about a book I have not read I have no problems to acknowledge my ignorance. I remain convinced, in any case, that Bayard's book is a fine satire against those who speak of books they have not read, perhaps

because the possibility that most conversations on books are carried out by people who don't read scares me too much.

<div style="background-color:#c6efce; text-align:center; font-weight:bold;">

1 March 2021/ GENDER AND SEX: RETHINKING LABELS IN VIEW OF NEW EVIDENCE

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A recent article in *The Washington Post* announced that "1 in 6 Gen Z adults are LGBT: And this number could continue to grow". Gen Zers are the persons born between 1997 and 2012 (or 2015 depending on the sources). They are, thus, between 6 and 24 years old, but the article refers specifically to those over 18. Journalist Samantha Schmidt describes this demographic as "a group of young Americans that is breaking from binary notions of gender and sexuality—and is far more likely than older generations to identify as something other than heterosexual". Yes, this is indeed cause for celebration, but we're speaking about 16.6% of Gen Zers at most, meaning that 83.4% still see themselves as binary and heterosexual, a reality nobody really knows how to approach.

Schmidt's data come from a Gallup survey declaring that 5.6% of all US adults identify as LGTB, whereas the percentage was 4.5% in the previous survey of 2017 (3.5% in 2012). The survey has other very interesting figures: "More than half of LGBT adults (54.6%) identify as bisexual. About a quarter (24.5%) say they are gay, with 11.7% identifying as lesbian and 11.3% as transgender"; only 3.3% give other self-definitions regarding gender and sexuality. Gallup confirms that 3.1% of Americans identify as bisexual (most of them are women), 1.4% as gay, 0.7% as lesbian, and 0.6% as transgender (which is a gender identity, not a sexual identity). The figures for Generation Z are 11.5% bisexual, 2.1% gay, 1.4% lesbian and 1.8% transgender (other 0.4%). "The pronounced generational differences" Gallup concludes, "raise questions about whether higher LGBT identification in younger than older Americans reflects a true shift in sexual orientation, or if it merely reflects a greater willingness of younger people to identify as LGBT".

My view is quite different: what the survey unveils, at least for the USA, is that the label LGBT might soon implode, as bisexuality, which is increasingly accompanied by individuals' declaring themselves genderfluid, is undermining any essentialisms that may still survive in this label. I don't want to go too much into this complex territory for fear of offending anyone but I must ask how a gay man and a genderfluid bisexual person can be grouped under the same label since the former's identity depends on binary constructions which are totally irrelevant (and unwelcome) for the latter. The Gallup survey seems to speak, rather, of a future in which the majority will still be heterosexual but diminishing (maybe down to 60-50%), followed by a very large group of bisexual persons (perhaps even 20 to 25%), next homosexuals (gays and lesbians), then transgender people, and then others (what happened to intersexuals and asexuals in this survey?). There will come a time, therefore, when the label LGTB, or LGTBIAQ+, whatever you prefer, will have to be reconsidered. As far as I am concerned, I welcome any news that speak of a greater variety of identities for people, related both to gender and reality. I find it cool that persons may refer to themselves as bisexual and genderfluid rather than be repressed for refusing binary labels (even though bisexual is also a binary label, pansexual being the non-binary term). However, I am left with two important questions: how do we speak of heterosexuality in this changing context? And why is sexuality still so important to define a person's identity?

About ten years ago I wrote a little book called *Desafíos a la heterosexualidad obligatoria* [*Challenges to Compulsory Heterosexuality*] (yes, you can download it for

free) and last week I was interviewed on it by Maria Giménez for the radio programme 'Feminismes a Ràdio 4' (here's the [podcast](#), in Catalan). I must say that my book has one very negative review on GoodReads, calling me awfully patronizing, and I have not re-read it since then for fear of really sounding condescending. I wish that person could explain to me over coffee why I sound so terribly to them but I think I can guess: the point I made in the book is that we need to establish a better dialogue between LGTB persons and the heterosexuals I called 'heteroqueer' (borrowing the word from Jackson Katz), that is to say, the persons who, like myself, do not care at all for heteronormativity. Or maybe it's just that my tone is really patronizing, for which I apologize.

Heterosexuality is not an invention of patriarchy, but it is certainly the case that patriarchy has used it to constitute the norm by which all other sexual identities have been repressed: that is what we call heteronormativity. This has been used to repress heterosexuals themselves, forcing us to understand sexuality as a tool for procreation, which of course it is not (or not only). In case you didn't know, the word 'heterosexuality' emerged in the 1920s, long after homosexuality (coined in 1869) to name a perversion: the sexual practice by man-woman couples who had sex without intention to reproduce. Heterosexuals, it turns out, know very little about the history of the concept and, unlike LGTB persons, have a very poor understanding of our own sexual identity. In fact, my book came about because I was harping all the time about this to the LGTB members of the research group I belonged to ([Body and textuality](#)) and its principal investigator, Meri Torras, asked me to write the volume and be done complaining, for which I thank her (though, as you can see, I am not done complaining).

'Heteroqueer' has never caught on but, as I did when I wrote the book, I still feel that the label LGTB forgets the heterosexuals who are not heteronormative and firmly reject heteronormativity. The position of heterosexuals in identity activism is as uncomfortable as the position of men in feminism (or whites in racism): we may be accepted as allies, but never as members integral to the movement. This is fine by me, but, just as I think that men can help feminism by undermining patriarchy, I believe that heterosexuals can help (and do help) LGTB persons by undermining heteronormativity. If it is a matter of renouncing privilege, then I think this can and must be done. My point is that just as it is not right to promote androphobia and identify all men with the patriarchal enemy—as French radical feminist Pauline Harmange has done in her recent book *I Hate Men*—it is not right to see all heterosexuals as the very embodiment of heteronormativity. Maybe this is patronizing, I don't know. As a heterosexual woman I stress that the patriarchal construction is heteronormativity, not heterosexuality, and, being in favour of the demolition of normativity for good, I declare myself an anti-patriarchal, anti-heteronormative heterosexual woman. This is my choice, and, if reading this you think that I am a deluded person who cannot see that her gender and her sexuality have been conditioned by patriarchy, maybe you're being patronizing…

Having said that, I must say that I am totally fed up with the insistence on sex and what I will call 'sexnormativity'. Heteronormativity has been used to repress people horribly into thinking that sex should be connected with reproduction, but now that sex has been disconnected from reproduction (not too successfully, thinking of how many women need to have abortions every year) we are in the grip of this constant compulsion to be sexual beings all the time. I wrote ten years ago and I will insist now that human affectivity goes beyond sex, not only with one's partners but generally in life. I'm really sick and tired of reading so many articles and books about how we connect with other persons in bed while nobody seems to care about how we connect with others as friends, in a work-related context, in the neighbourhood, etc. I agree, of course, that sex needs to be discussed as openly as possible, both in its good and its bad aspects, but there seems to be a kind of sex police out there monitoring how often we have sex and with how many partners, from adolescence to the day we die. To be honest, I fail to

understand why sex has this hyperbolic presence in our lives, though I very much suspect that this is not examined in depth because the main promoters of its omnipresence are sexnormativist men. I am not disputing the discourse of sexual liberation but wondering why this aspect of human behaviour is taking up so much personal and social energy, at the expense of other forms of human affectivity.

So, going back to where I started, I will insist that both LGTB and heterosexuality are labels that need to be revised and reconfigured, even lost if that would help everyone be happier. As regards gender, as much as I like the label 'genderfluid' I still think that we do not have yet the cultural markers—from fashion down to person's names—that can help genderfluid non-binary persons make themselves visible. We do need them urgently. I do not doubt for a moment that humankind would be better off with more variety, and with many more genderfluid pansexuals. But, above all, I would like to have sex become less ubiquitous in the media, the social networks, and so on, so that people can be free from compulsory sexnormativity. Perhaps I'll eventually write a book called *Challenges to Compulsory Sexuality*. And try to be less patronizing…

9 March 2021/ MEN AND MASCULINITY IN CINEMA: 103 BOOKS

In case this might interest any scholars working on men and masculinity in cinema, here's my bibliography of the field, from 1977 to 2020. The selection does not include many books on the filmographies in other languages than English, though there are some volumes that do deal with them and that are included here to mark the beginning of certain trends. I have organized this by decade for readers to see how an academic field grows from nothing to become a fully established area of research.

1970s and 1980s: the prehistory, before the field becomes fully academic. Please note that the interest in exploring men in cinema begins with a woman and in the middle of the second feminist wave, before the establishment of Masculinity Studies in the late 1980s /early 1990s. Also note the attention paid at this early stage to the representation of gay men by activist Vito Russo.

Mellen, Joan 1977. *Big bad wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*. Pantheon Books.

Spoto, Donald. 1978. *Camerado: Hollywood and the American man*. New American Library.

Malone, Michael. 1979. *Heroes of Eros: Male sexuality in the movies*. Dutton.

Russo, Vito. 1981, 1987 (revised). *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the movies*. Harper & Row.

Neibaur, James L. 1989. *Tough guy: The American movie macho*. McFarland & Co.

1990s: I once read that Cultural Studies were invented by Routledge, and perhaps this statement has a point—you know that a field is consolidated when Routledge starts publishing research on it. Please note the focus on the concept 'Hollywood' and the emergence of specific genres (film noir) and periods (the 1950s, the Reagan era). I have underlined the names everyone should be familiar with. 1993 certainly was a glorious year. Note the attention paid to specific actors and the beginnings of an interest in foreign cinema.

Krutnik, Frank. 1991. *In a lonely street: Film noir, genre and masculinity*. Routledge.

<u>Silverman</u>, Kaja 1992. *Male subjectivity at the margins*. Routledge.

<u>Clover</u>, Carol J. 1993. *Men, women and chainsaws: Gender in the modern horror film*. British Film Institute.

Cohan, Steven and Ina Rae Hark. 1993, 2016. *Screening the male: Exploring masculinities in the Hollywood cinema*. Routledge.

Jeffords, Susan. 1993. *Hard bodies: Hollywood masculinity in the Reagan era*. Rutgers UP.

Kirkham, Pat and Jane Thumin. 1993. *You Tarzan: Masculinity, movies, and men*. Lawrence & Wishart.

Penley, Constance and Sharon Willis. 1993. *Male trouble*. University of Minnesota Press.

Tasker, Yvonne. 1993. *Spectacular bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema*. Routledge.

Bingham, Dennis. 1994 *Acting male: Masculinities in the films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood*. Rutgers UP.

Callaghan, Lisa. 1994. *Hollywood images of masculinity: Eastwood, Hoffman, Redford and Schwarzenegger*. Oxford UP.

Reckley, Ralph. 1994. *Images of the black male in literature and film: Essays in criticism*. Middle Atlantic Writers Association Press.

Sklar, Robert. 1994. *City boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield*. Princeton UP.

Mitchell, Lee Clark. 1996. *Westerns: Making the man in fiction and film*. University of Chicago Press.

Cohan, Steven. 1997. *Masked men: Masculinity and the movies in the fifties*. Indiana UP.

Powrie, Phil. 1997. *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the crisis of masculinity*. Oxford UP.

2000-2004: 2002 was another glorious year! Please notice the attention paid to national and ethnic masculinities, homosexuality, and, interestingly, children's cinema—a trend that should, definitely, grow. You'll find referenced here books on the films by specific directors (this is a trend that has not really caught on) and in foreign-language cinema (a trend now fully blown). I'm underlining the best-known book here.

Chan, Jachinson W. 2001. *Chinese American masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee*. Routledge.

Lehman, Peter, ed. 2001. *Masculinity: Bodies, movies, culture*. Routledge.

Spicer, Andrew. 2001. *Typical men: The representation of masculinity in popular British cinema*. I.B. Tauris.

Trice, Ashton D. and Samuel A. Holland. 2001. *Heroes, antiheroes, and dolts: Portrayals of masculinity in American popular films, 1921-1999*. McFarland.

Abbott, Megan E. 2002. *The street was mine: White masculinity in hardboiled fiction and film noir*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Butters, Gerald R. 2002. *Black manhood on the silent screen*. UP of Kansas.

Clum, John M. 2002. *He's all man: Male homosexuality and myths of masculinity in American drama and film*. Palgrave.

Holmlund, Christine. 2002. *Impossible bodies: Femininity and masculinity at the movies*. Routledge.

Lang, Robert. 2002. *Masculine interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood film*. Columbia UP.

LaSalle, Mick. 2002. *Dangerous men: Pre-code Hollywood and the birth of the modern man*. St. Martin's Press.

MacKinnon, Kenneth. 2002. *Love, tears, and the male spectator*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP.

Stephens, John, ed. 2002. *Ways of being male: Representing masculinities in children's literature and film*. Routledge.

Perriam, Christopher. 2003. *Stars and masculinities in Spanish cinema: From Banderas to Bardem*. Oxford UP.

Nicholls, Mark Desmond. 2004. *Scorsese's men: Melancholia and the mob*. Pluto Press.

Powrie, Phil, Ann Davies, and Bruce Babington, eds. 2004. *The trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*. Wallflower.

Reich, Jacqueline. 2004. *Beyond the Latin lover: Marcello Mastroianni, masculinity, and Italian cinema*. Indiana UP.

2005-2009: Hall's 2005 handbook shows that by this date the label 'masculinity in cinema' was already being used in courses in Film Studies, otherwise why publish a handbook? I'd like to call your attention to how Creed's volume on men is far less known than her seminal 1993 volume on women. Here the glorious year is 2006. Pullen's volume is the only one dealing with masculinity in documentary film I have found; Zacahry Ingle and David M. Sutera's edited volume *Gender and Genre in Sports Documentaries: Critical Essays* (2013), deals partly with women (which is right, as it announces it deals with 'gender').

Bruzzi, Stella 2005. *Bringing up daddy: Fatherhood and masculinity in post-war Hollywood*. British Film Institute.

Creed, Barbara. 2005. *Phallic panic: Film, horror and the primal uncanny*. Melbourne UP.

Hall, Matthew 2005. *Teaching men and film*. British Film Institute.

Chopra-Gant, Mike. 2006. *Hollywood genres and postwar America: Masculinity, family and nation in popular movies and film noir*. I.B. Tauris.

Claydon, E. Anna. 2006. *The representation of masculinity in British cinema of the 1960s: Lawrence of Arabia, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, and The Hill*. Edwin Mellen Press.

Dennis, J. P. 2006. *Queering teen culture: All-American boys and same-sex desire in film and television*. Harrington Park Press.

Gallagher, Mark. 2006. *Action figures: Men, action films, and contemporary adventure narratives*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gates, Philippa. 2006. *Detecting men: Masculinity and the Hollywood detective film*. State University of New York Press.

Gerstner, David. 2006. *Manly arts: Masculinity and nation in early American cinema*. Duke UP.

Harris, Keith M. 2006. *Boys, boyz, bois: An ethics of Black masculinity in film and popular media*. Routledge.

Plain, Gill. 2006. *John Mills and British cinema: Masculinity, identity and nation*. Edinburgh UP.

Eberwein, Robert. 2007. *Armed forces: Masculinity and sexuality in the American war film*. Rutgers UP.

Koureas, Gabriel. 2007. *Memory, masculinity, and national identity in British visual culture, 1914-1930: A study of 'unconquerable manhood.'* Ashgate.

Pullen, Christopher. 2007. *Documenting gay men: Identity and performance in reality television and documentary film*. McFarland & Co.

Baker, Brian. 2008. *Masculinity in fiction and film: Representing men in popular genres, 1945-2000*. Continuum.

Grønstad, Asbjørn 2008. *Transfigurations: Violence, death and masculinity in American cinema*. Amsterdam UP.

Patterson, Eric. 2008. *On Brokeback Mountain: Meditations about masculinity, fear, and love in the story and the film*. Lexington Books.

Cornell, Drucilla. 2009. *Clint Eastwood and issues of American masculinity*. Fordham UP.

Fouz-Hernández, Santiago, ed. 2009. *Mysterious skin: Male bodies in contemporary cinema*. I.B. Tauris.

Morag, Raya. 2009. *Defeated masculinity: Post-traumatic cinema in the aftermath of war*. Peter Lang.

Nystrom, Derek. 2009. *Hard hats, rednecks, and macho men: Class in 1970s American cinema*. Oxford UP.

Schleier, Merrill 2009. *Skyscraper cinema: Architecture and gender in American film*. University of Minnesota Press.

2010-2014: Yes, 26 books in five years! I'd like to call attention to Bruzzi's book, which is the only one I have seen so far which claims that the cinema made by men has a certain style, and therefore we should speak of men's cinema, as we speak of women's cinema. I stand by that! I also would like to call attention to Amy Davis's volume, the first one to discuss masculinity in animated children's cinema.

Donovan, Barna William 2010. *Blood, guns, and testosterone: Action films, audiences, and a thirst for violence*. Scarecrow Press, 2010.

Larke-Walsh, George S. 2010. *Screening the mafia: Masculinity, ethnicity and mobsters from The Godfather to The Sopranos*. McFarland & Co.

Rehling, Nicola. 2010. *Extra-ordinary men: White heterosexual masculinity and contemporary popular cinema*. Lexington Books.

Cornelius, Michael G. 2011. *Of muscles and men: Essays on the sword and sandal film*. McFarland & Company.

Donald, Ralph and Karen MacDonald. 2011. *Reel men at war: Masculinity and the American war film*. Scarecrow Press.

Grant, Barry Keith. 2011. *Shadows of doubt: Negotiations of masculinity in American genre films*. Wayne State UP.

Gray, Richard J. and Betty Kaklamanidou, eds. 2011. *The 21st century superhero: Essays on gender, genre and globalization in film*. McFarland & Co.

Greven, David. 2011. *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush*. University of Texas Press.

Peberdy, Donna. 2011. *Masculinity and film performance: Male angst in contemporary American cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vicari, Justin. 2011. *Male bisexuality in current cinema: Images of growth, rebellion and survival*. McFarland & Co.

King, Claire Sisco. 2012. *Washed in blood: Male sacrifice, trauma, and the cinema*. Rutgers UP.

Schultz, Robert T. 2012. *Soured on the system: Disaffected men in 20th century American film*. McFarland & Co.

Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. 2012. *Straitjacket sexualities: Unbinding Asian American manhoods in the movies*. Stanford UP.

Alberti, John. 2013, 2016. *Masculinity in the contemporary romantic comedy: Gender as Genre*. Routledge.

Alberti, John. 2013. *Masculinity in contemporary popular cinema*. Taylor and Francis.

Bruzzi, Stella. 2013. *Men's cinema: Masculinity and mise-en-scène in Hollywood*. Edinburgh UP.

Combe, Kirk and Brenda M. Boyle. 2013. *Masculinity and monstrosity in contemporary Hollywood films*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Davis, Amy M. 2013. *Handsome heroes & vile villains: Men in Disney's feature animation*. John Libbey.

Greven, David. 2013. *Psycho-sexual: Male desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin*. University of Texas Press.

Hamad, Hannah. 2013. *Postfeminism and paternity in contemporary US film: Framing fatherhood*. Routledge.

Ingle, Zachary and David M. Sutera, eds. 2013. *Gender and genre in sports documentaries: Critical essays*. Scarecrow Press.

Jackson II, Ronald, and Jamie E. Moshin, eds. 2013. *Communicating marginalized masculinities: Identity politics in TV, film, and new media*. Routledge.

Meeuf, Russell. 2013. *John Wayne's world: Transnational masculinity in the fifties*. University of Texas Press.

Moser, Joseph Paul. 2013. *Irish masculinity on screen: The pugilists and peacemakers of John Ford, Jim Sheridan and Paul Greengrass*. McFarland & Co.

Deangelis, Michael. 2014. *Reading the bromance: Homosocial relationships in film and television*. Wayne State UP.

O'Brien, Daniel. 2014. *Classical masculinity and the spectacular body on film: The mighty sons of Hercules*. Palgrave.

2015-2019: Here are all the trends: nationality, ethnicity, specific male stars, genres (with science fiction and romance complementing the analysis in previous decades of film noir, western and actions films), previously ignored decades, and whatever you may wish…

Fain, Kimberly. 2015. *Black Hollywood: From butlers to superheroes, the changing role of African American men in the movies*. Praeger.

Yu, Sabrina Qiong. 2015. *Jet Li: Chinese masculinity and transnational film stardom*. Edinburgh UP.

Balducci, Anthony. 2016. *I won't grow up!: The comic man-child in film from 1901 to the present*. McFarland & Co.

Bell, Matt. 2016. *The boys in the band: Flashpoints of cinema, history, and queer politics*. Wayne State UP.

Wooden, Shannon R. and Ken Gillam. 2016. *Pixar's boy stories: Masculinity in a postmodern age*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Greven, David. 2017. *Ghost faces: Hollywood and post-millennial masculinity*. State University of New York Press.

O'Brien, Daniel. 2017. *Black masculinity on film: Native sons and white lies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Carrasco, Rocío. 2018. *New heroes on screen: Prototypes of masculinity in contemporary science fiction cinema*. Universidad de Huelva.

Kac-Vergne, Marianne 2018. *Masculinity in contemporary science fiction cinema: Cyborgs, troopers and other men of the future*. I.B. Tauris.

Allan, J. A. 2019. *Men, masculinities, and popular romance*. Routledge.

Deakin, Pete. 2019. *White masculinity in crisis in Hollywood's fin de millennium cinema*. Lexington Books.

Kelly, Gillian. 2019. *Robert Taylor: Male beauty, masculinity, and stardom in Hollywood*. UP of Mississippi.

Petersen, Christina. 2019. *The freshman: Comedy and masculinity in 1920s film and youth culture*. Routledge.

Willis, Joseph P. 2019. *Threatened masculinity: From British fiction 1880-1915 to Cold-War German cinema*. Routledge.

2020-2021: I assume that Covid-19 has affected academic production because I have only found these titles for 2020 (including my own volume!). Although the bibliography was intended to cover until 2020, I'd like to mention too Shary's volume, as I think age should be the next big field of research in Film Studies connected with men and masculinities. The representation of little boys and of old men needs to be better assessed.

Barnett, Katie. 2020. *Fathers on film: Paternity and masculinity in 1990s Hollywood*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Donnar, Glen. 2020. *Troubling masculinities: Terror, gender, and monstrous others in American film post-9/11*. UP of Mississippi.

Luzón-Aguado, Virginia. 2020. *Harrison Ford: Masculinity and stardom in Hollywood*. Bloomsbury.

Martín, Sara. 2020. *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men*. Cambridge Scholars Publishers.

Padva, Gilad. 2020. *Straight skin, gay masks and pretending to be gay on screen*. Routledge.

Shary, Timothy. 2021. *Cinemas of boyhood: Masculinity, sexuality, nationality*. Berghahn.

So you can see how a field of research grows from zero to one hundred—if you're curious pay attention to which publishers have issued these books and you will see that there is a pattern there. I hope this is useful!

15 March 2021/ RESPECT THE TRANSLATOR!: AMANDA GORMAN AND THE INACCEPTABLE DISMISSAL OF HER CATALAN TRANSLATOR

National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman (Los Angeles, 1988) became a world-wide celebrity two months ago, after her reading of her poem "The Hill We Climb" during President Joe Biden's inauguration (on 6th January). I am not particularly interested in assessing her quality as a poet, which I find rather overvalued, but on criticizing the appalling decision taken to dismiss the work of her Catalan translator Víctor Obiols, on whose defence I am writing this post (and no, I have never met him). Allow me to explain the details of the case.

Gorman will publish later this year a poetry collection with the title of her inauguration poem, which is eagerly awaited. Her Dutch publishers, Meulenhoff, announced early this month that writer Marieke Lucas Rijneveld had been chosen to be Gorman's translator (I'm following among other sources this one). Rijneveld, 29, the youngest winner of the International Booker prize for her debut novel *The Discomfort of Evening*, and a non-binary person very much aware of the pressures of public opinion, seemed a very good choice. They did welcome the commission, mentioning in a tweet Gorman's "power of reconciliation" as a major point in their decision, but subsequently withdrew from the project, after a remarkable tweetstorm.

This was unleased by Janice Deul, a black Dutch journalist and activist, who published an article in *Volksrant*, arguing that, as a white person, Rijneveld was not the best choice to translate Gorman. She asked (or demanded) that the publishers choose someone like the American poet, that is to say, young, female and "unapologetically Black" for the task. Many others echoed her complaint and, as noted, Rijneveld abandoned the project, subsequently writing in their Twitter account that "I had happily devoted myself to translating Amanda's work, seeing it as the greatest task to keep her strength, tone and style. However, I realise that I am in a position to think and feel that way, where many are not. I still wish that her ideas reach as many readers as possible and open hearts". Later, she published a (not very good) poem in *The Guardian* about the experience, claiming that even though she has always resisted judgement in this case she feels "able to grasp when it/ isn't your place, when you must kneel for a poem because/ another person can make it more inhabitable; not out of/ unwillingness, not out of dismay, but because you know/ there is so much inequality, people still discriminated against,/ what you want is fraternity (…)". As I write, two weeks after the uproar no other Dutch translator has been appointed.

Víctor Obiols, an experienced translator known also by his artistic name Víctor Bocanegra (he's a poet and musician), was vetted by Gorman's agents five days ago when he had already handed in his Catalan translation of her forthcoming book to publishers Univers. Speaking to Jordi Nopca for the Catalan newspaper *Ara* Obiols

declared that he was told that Gorman's agents wanted "una dona amb un perfil d'activista i, si pot ser, d'origen afroamericà" ("a woman with an activist profile and, if possible, with an African-American origin"). Author Nuria Barrios is so far translating with no problem Gorman's poem for Lumen into Spanish but Univers are still seeking a new translator, having paid Obiols for a translated text that will never be published.

Obiols told global news agency AFP that this "It is a very complicated subject that cannot be treated with frivolity. But if I cannot translate a poet because she is a woman, young, black, an American of the 21st century, neither can I translate Homer because I am not a Greek of the eighth century BC. Or could not have translated Shakespeare because I am not a 16th-century Englishman". He made, however, a more biting comment on his Twitter account when he wrote that (my translation) perhaps Gorman's agents think that "a translator into Catalan who is also black—perhaps a woman with roots in Western Africa and raised in Catalonia—might have much more in common with a Los Angeles Afro-American, with a Harvard degree, who is also a model". In fact, the agents' request that Gorman be translated into Catalan by an African-American, if possible, only shows an appalling ignorance of Catalonia's own black population and a US-centric bias that can never go well with translation.

I was not going to write about this ridiculous, absurd affair but I read an article in *El Confidencial* calling for some sort of action to protect the translators. I am not myself a professional translator but I have done some translating, and I feel immense loyalty to this group of always unfairly treated professionals. Without translators there is no intercultural communication and the last thing they need is being disrespected for their personal identity. Yes, I'm calling what Amanda Gorman's agents are doing a profound disrespect, particularly because both in the Dutch and in the Catalan cases the translator was already at work or done. The payment Obiols has received is not sufficient apology for the slap in the face he has got for not being young (a sign of ageism), a woman (of androphobia) and African-American (of racism). Spanish legislation guarantees that no person can be discriminated by reasons of identity in the job market, and what has happened with Obiols is, in my view, illegal. It is, besides, idiotic, for Gorman's agents have no guarantee that a translator closer to her identity will produce a better translation.

The translators interviewed in *El Confidencial* try to take the hullaballoo with some humour that can hardly disguise the sinister overtones of the case. Mercedes Cebrián jokes that she can only translate short-sighted persons, being one herself, but finds the situation a story out of *Black Mirror*, the kind of scary situation that can quickly snowball and that benefits nobody except a "maddened Puritanism" (my translation). Another translator, Isabel García Adánez, points out that this attitude only harms the author, who can find herself in a ghettoized literary circle. I must say that I have been tempted to email Gorman's agents to explain the damage they are doing to their client's reputation in Catalonia with this misguided positioning but, well, let them learn the lesson. I am also thinking of the new Dutch and Catalan translators and how they will feel knowing that they have been picked up because of their skin colour and not their professional value. No doubt, this may be an opportunity for an aspiring translator who happens to be a black young woman to make her professional name, but the circumstances are, to say the least, dubious.

Translators are, most obviously, persons, not machines, and their personalities are part of the translation process. Translator and theorist Laurence Venuti has even asked for translation to be considered a literary genre, and translators a type of writer. I quite agree with his view, for it is obvious to me that readers in countries like Spain, where everybody reads translations, seem to believe that translators are an irrelevant part of the process of intercultural communication. Each translator has their style and no two translations can be alike, but, of course, one thing is saying this and quite another is claiming that the translator's identity must match that of the author. I know, of course, of

cases in which the work of a woman has been substantially altered by her male translator; a most famous instance is that of H. M. Parshley's generally very poor 1953 translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* into English, only corrected with Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier 2009 version. I think, however, that translators are on the whole a particularly open-minded set of professionals; it is hard for me to think of someone with no empathy devoting their lives to translating the words of others. There is, I believe, a generosity in this that has been woefully overlooked in the Gorman case.

I always say that in controversial cases what one needs to do is to consider the opposite to correctly gauge the offense. Now suppose that a young, African-American, female translator had already completed her translation into English of Víctor Obiols' poetry (remember he is a poet?) and that he asked his agents to reject it, replacing her with a white, middle-aged man like himself. That would be immediately read as an outrageous act of combined sexism and racism, and that is what it would be. As Obiols notes, Amanda Gorman is, besides young and African-American, a beautiful woman with a modelling contract with IMG Models. If we go down the identity path, it could be argued that her translator should also have the experience of being physically very attractive for, surely, being a great-looking woman is not at all the same as being plain (as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre comments on). Where, then, does identity stop? Could a plain, old black woman translator understand Gorman as her agents wish? Which factor should predominate: age, age, race? How about beauty, class, nationality?

The growing racial separatism is, in short, racializing persons and situations that should not be racialized. Interracial collaboration will always be necessary (how many female black translators is Gorman going to find in, say, Russia or China?), which is why I think that the wrong stance has been taken. As happens, Dutch publisher Meulenhoff did mention that Amanda Gorman had selected Rijneveld to be her translator. What offended Janice Deul was not really the choice but that the publishers described Rijneveld as a "dream candidate". Her opinion noting that Rijneveld, though not a bad choice, was not at all the perfect one became magnified by social media ranting into a general opinion that Rijneveld was an inacceptable choice. What went wrong in this case, then, is that a) Meulenhoff bowed down to social media frenzy, b) Rijneveld did not stand her ground as she should have done, c) Gorman never gave her opinion. For all we know, she is disappointed but her Twitter account makes no mention of the Dutch or the Catalan translations. The lack of comment is, of course, a comment in itself suggesting that Gorman is failing to be aware of what her misguided agents are doing on her behalf.

Hopefully, this is yet another storm in a tweetcup, but it does hurt to see translation and translators treated in this awfully ignorant way. My recommendation to Gorman is that she changes agents, not translators, as quickly as possible before too much damage is done and her "power of reconciliation" evaporates.

22 March 2021/ SHAME OF THE NATION: ON WATCHING *EL SILENCIO DE OTROS*

It is habitual in scholarly work that a text illuminates another text quite by chance, in that phenomenon usually called serendipity. Reading the second edition of Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004, 2014) to fill in a serious gap in my list of books read, I have found myself considering in the light of what she writes a documentary everyone in Spain should see: Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar's multi-award winner *El Silencio de Otros* (*The Silence of Others*, 2019). What Ahmed writes about shame in her volume has helped me to process my own feelings of shame regarding

what the documentary narrates even though, as you will see, the cases in question are quite different.

I find that Ahmed writes in a rather abstract way, as if she were a philosopher mainly, and after finally reading her book, I realise that she is one of those big names whose texts everyone plunders following their own interests and not necessarily what she says. Of course, I am going to do exactly the same here. Incidentally, I have been amazed to learn that Ahmed is now an independent scholar, having severed her ties with all universities. This happened in 2016 after she discovered that her employer, Goldsmith's College in London, had been turning a blind eye on a long list of sexual abuses perpetrated by its male professors. I applaud her brave decision, though few of us at a far more modest academic tier can take that kind of dramatic step (I also wonder to what extent her leaving helped the female students—but I digress).

Briefly, *El Silencio de Otros* (available on Netflix) deals with how the Ley de Amnistía passed by the post-Franco new democratic Parliament has prevented the crimes of Franco's henchmen from being investigated. The film's focus falls on a variety of cases, from the recovery of the remains of persons executed by the anti-Republican military rebels to the suffering of the victims of torturer Billy el Niño, passing through the thousands of babies stolen between 1940 and 1990. All these cases are grouped under the *Querella argentina*, the name received by the class action lawsuit investigated by Argentinian judge María Romilda Servini de Cubria between 2010 and 2015 (with no sentences whatsoever). She accepted the case on the principle of universal justice at the request of two descendants of victims of the Francoist regime. This was after Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón was expelled from the judiciary for trying to investigate the crimes, on the grounds that he was breaking the Amnesty Law of 1977.

The documentary focuses on a variety of persons, but two elderly women stand out among them: María Martín, who lost her mother, and Ascensión Murieta, who lost her father, both to the brutal action of murderous Francoist squads decimating the 'reds'. María, the classic Spanish village grandmother clad in black, opens the documentary pointing at the road crossing her village and claiming that her mother and other victims lie under it. Garzón's own lawsuit mentions 114226 victims whose bodies were then missing; less than 10% have been disinterred and properly buried thanks to the Ley de la Memoria Histórica of 2011 and other legislation previously passed by regional Governments. I must clarify, however, that most identifications, if not all, have been carried out by the NGO Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, not by the authorities. I had assumed that most victims were piled in the mass graves of cemeteries, in lonely spots in the woods and in road ditches, but it had not occurred to me that cars might be rolling over dead bodies on a daily basis. That seemed far worse than the decision by the Málaga Town Council, withdrawn in 2017, to place an area for dogs on top of mass grave number eight in the local cemetery of San Rafael, one of the biggest collections of Francoist mass graves in Spain. Seeing the cars roll by, I felt not only sorrow for María and her mother but also a very deep shame about the nation where I live.

In Alfredo Sanzol's excellent play *En la Luna* (2012) two characters discuss, if I recall this correctly, the problems one has to rescue the remains of her Republican grandfather from the road ditch where he was thrown by his executors. The scene happens in 1990, and the other character, a man, comforts her saying that all will be well because, surely, they cannot have the Barcelona Olympic Games of 1992 with so many bodies still unclaimed. That scene still strikes me because Sanzol stresses in this clever way the idea that Spain has never been subjected to the international scrutiny that other countries have faced, including the Argentina of Justice Salvini. In her country and in other post-dictatorial democracies, all the Amnesty Laws passed to protect criminal regimes where annulled so that the crimes against humanity could be judged. Spain, in

contrast, has always taken the position that forgiving works better than judging, applying a 'let bygones be bygones' policy that the Socialist-sponsored Ley de la Memoria Histórica has barely eroded.

An argument often invoked is that the Civil War, anyway, happened a long time ago, which disregards both the abuses committed by the long dictatorship and the existence of survivors from the war itself. The other main argument is that, anyway, the 'Reds' were also genocidal murderers who killed thousands arbitrarily during the Republic and the war, and who would have likewise exterminated many fallen foes had they won. This argument, often invoked by right-wing persons of Francoist leanings, does acknowledge the crimes, as it can be seen, but justifies them on the spurious grounds that the 'others' were equally brutal. I doubt this is the case, but even so the Ley de Memoria Histórica is not limited to the Republican victims but to all victims. Yet, since no descendants of the Civil War winners are digging mass graves or road ditches to rescue the bones of their grandparents this possibly means that the victims caused by the Republicans were not that many, or that they are properly buried. I cannot explain otherwise the indifference to the obvious suffering of persons like Ascensión Murieta, who lost her father Timoteo in 1939, when she was only six, and could only ease her pain the day his body was found in 2017, as *El Silencio de Otros* shows.

Sara Ahmed refers in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* to the 'Stolen Generations' of Australia, that is to say, the indigenous children mostly of mixed race forcefully but 'legally' removed from their families by a combination of the Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions, between 1905 and 1967, in some case as late as the 1970s. The appalling idea behind this mass kidnapping was that the children could be in this way assimilated into the white Australian nation, though, of course, this awful crime only resulted in deep personal and national trauma. A formal apology was presented in 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, though at the time Ahmed was writing Prime Minister John Howard had adamantly rejected all calls for an apology. The situation, as you can see, is quite different from the Civil War and the dictatorship in Spain though, at least until 2008, the key question was similar: those in power refused to acknowledge a crime against humanity and apologize for it. Ahmed worries that shame can be acknowledged hypocritically so that those who apologize do so to continue a false narrative of national unity. Yet, she worries above all by how the lack of shame then embodied by Prime Minister Howard undermines the communal ability to "identify with a national ideal" (111). Although acknowledging the "brutal history" is not a magic solution, shame appears to be a positive step so that "the shame of the absence of shame" (111) can be overcome, always taking care that this witnessing might not "repeat the passing over" of the victims "in the very desire to move beyond shame and into pride" (111).

Most importantly, in cases such as that of the Stolen Generation, the shame is not only faced internally but externally, before "international civil society" (112). Ahmed, a British-born Australian, writes that "Being seen as an ideal nation is here defined as that which will pass down in time, not in our memories, but in how we are remembered by others. The desire for shame is here the desire to be seen as fulfilling an ideal, the desire to be 'judged by history' as an ideal nation" (112). In her conclusions, Ahmed writes that "The projects of reconciliation and reparation are not about the 'nation' recovering: they are about whether those who are the victims of injustice can find a way of living in the nation that feels better through the process of speaking about the past, and through exposing the wounds that get concealed by the 'truths' of a certain history" (201). In the Australian case, and in others like Argentina or Chile, the international mechanism of shame has more or less worked (remember that Justice Garzón managed to have Augusto Pinochet arrested in London in 1998 but the monster walked away free thanks to the efforts of Margaret Thatcher and President George Bush senior). What is extraordinary about the Spanish case is that the international mechanism of shame has

had no effect: Justice Salvini was simply not allowed to interrogate either witnesses or the accused in Spain (extradition was, of course, denied), whereas Amnesty International's calls to the Attorney General's Office of Spain to investigate and prosecute the crimes have been ignored. Watching *El Silencio de Otros* I felt shame at the lack of shame, particularly because I do not see on the horizon any apology, much less any serious, committed investigation.

I find the idea of being proud of one's nation quite silly for there is no nation truly free of fault. At least, though, I would like not to feel ashamed, as I can only feel for as long as 100000 fellow Spaniards remain buried in mass graves or under the tarmac daily tread on by rushing cars. I would be very proud if the Spanish Parliament agreed by unanimity to put each of these victims in the family graves where they belong, because that would mean that a first step into healing the nation had been taken. But since this is a fantasy, we must live in shame. So far, we have done quite a good job of hiding this deep national shame, so much so that Franco's heirs are daily gaining power, as if they have nothing to apologize for. In view of all this, it is logically easier for me, and for many others, to deny that we are Spanish and to cling with all our might onto the idea that we are Catalan. Not really because we are independentists, or because Catalonia is a perfectly civilized haven, but because being Catalan is not internationally connected with any specific shameful events. It's a little like being Danish if you know what I mean.

By the way, if you watch *El Silencio de Otros* and come across calls to abolish the Amnesty Law of 1977, be careful. As happens, the law was passed to free those unfairly accused and imprisoned by Franco's regime, though it has had the side-effect of helping the Francoist henchmen to escape prison. This law does need to be abolished but only to be replaced by a new law that finally applies internationally accepted legislation about crimes against humanity to Spain—and that lifts the veil of shame under which we still live.

6 April 2021/ RETHINKING THE PLACE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND WONDERING ABOUT ACTING

I wrote my last post about a documentary film and I was not really thinking of continuing with the same topic but I came across a very interesting article by Carlos Lara, "¿Debería poder ganar un documental el Goya a Mejor Película?" ("Should a documentary film win the Goya to Best Film?", so, here I go again. Lara is asking the question in relation to this year's Goya winner for best documentary, *El año del descubrimiento* by Luis López Carrasco and to one of the nominees, *My Mexican Bretzel* by Nuria Giménez Lorang. In Lara's view, these two films are much better (meaning far more daring) than those in the fiction film category, the winner *Las niñas*, and the nominees, *Adú*, *Ane*, *Sentimental* and *La boda de Rosa*. I cannot offer an informed opinion as I have only seen Iciar Bollaín's *La boda de Rosa*, which I absolutely loved. I can say, however, that I have found myself not only watching more and more documentary films in the last year but also finding them far more satisfactory than fiction films. Incidentally, I must note that the Rumanian documentary *Collective* is making history at this year's Oscars, after being nominated in the best documentary and the best international feature film categories. I must also note that whereas 24 women have won Oscars for feature-length documentary films (Barbara Kopple has won twice) only 1 woman (Kathryn Bigelow) has won an Oscar for best director. I would say, then, that it is also in women's interests to make documentary films more prominent and visible.

What Carlos Lara is implicitly asking is why documentary films are less valued than fiction films. Please, note that the label 'fiction film' is only used when it is necessary to contrast what we usually just call 'films' with documentary films. That is, then, one of the problems: any film which carries an adjective in its label (documentary film, animated film, short film) appears to be in a separate category from the generic category 'film', which in fact corresponds specifically to the feature-length live-action fiction film. The supposition, I assume, is that the fiction film is better valued because it is supposedly harder to tell a story from scratch, through scenes performed by actors, than creating a film using animation, or involving scenes from real life, or told in less than 90 minutes. As you can see, the moment this is made explicit, it sounds quite absurd. Only prejudiced convention determines that the feature-length live-action fiction film is accepted as the main category for films. There is, in fact, no specific reason why the other kinds of films are undervalued, except a poor understanding of the effort it takes to make them and of their aesthetics.

Having mentioned the word 'aesthetics' I will now ask the question of whether this is all we take into consideration when choosing to watch a fiction film or a documentary. Believe me when I say that trying to define the fiction film and the documentary film for what they do is much harder than it seems, and perhaps aesthetics is the answer to what separates one from the other. Let me take an example on which I have written: the documentary by Rob Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984, Oscar Award winner) and the fiction film *Milk* (2008, Gus Van Sant). This was the winner of an Oscar for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role, which went to Sean Penn, and of an Oscar for Best Writing, Original Screenplay, awarded to Dustin Lance Black. Here the problems begin, for although *Milk* is not based on a previous work, the connections between Black's 'original' screenplay and Epstein's documentary are more than obvious. Van Sant, besides, uses original footage also used by Epstein, recreating some of the scenes with his actors.

Anyway, my point is that both films tell in a very talented way the same story: how Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected for office (he was a member of San Francisco's Town Council) was murdered in cold blood, by his fellow councillor Dan White, who also killed the mayor, George Moscone. Now ask yourself how you would like to know about this tragic event: through the documentary or through the fiction film? Just trust me when I say that both tell the story proficiently and in a moving, entertaining way. Advantages of the documentary? It is, obviously, far more informative and has plenty of footage of the real Harvey Milk, and other persons of his circle. Advantages of the fiction film? It recreates far more personal aspects of Milk's private life into which the documentary does not go, and the acting is very good. I would say that both films are excellent and, in combination, a superb cinematic experience. Yet, we rarely find time for two films on the same topic. In fact, although I see the point in making a documentary once the fiction film has been made, I see little point in making the fiction film once the documentary is available, particularly if said documentary is a great film as Epstein's is. Consider, if you want another example, why Robert Zemeckis's fiction film *The Walk* (2015) exists, since James Marsh's *Man on Wire* (2008) tells wonderfully the story of how Frenchman Phillip Petite crossed on a wire the distance between New York's Twin Towers in 1974. Is it a matter of availability? Of audiences not knowing that certain documentaries exist? Or is it, as I say, a question of aesthetics? Why do audiences prefer the fakery of fiction film to the 'authenticity' of the documentary?

I have written the word 'authenticity' in inverted comas because this is the issue that bedevils any understanding of the documentary. To put it simply, fiction films can lie as much as they want, even when they recreate real-life events, but documentary films are not supposed to lie, yet they do. In fact, it is quite possible that all boils down to a misunderstanding. Famously, the Scottish father of the documentary, John Grierson,

commended in a review *Moana* (1926)—a film portraying the natives of the South Pacific made by the American father of the documentary Robert Flaherty—for its "documentary" value, which eventually lent this film genre its name. As happens, however, Flaherty's film was full of staged scenes that he had invented on the basis of the local 'traditions' which he forced his native actors to perform; besides, Grierson wrote that *Moana* was perhaps more interesting for its poetic values. The idea that the documentary documents reality does not come simply from that review and that remark but it is certainly connected with it, and has made it almost impossible to define the genre with precision since not all documentaries 'document' reality (many re-create it) and what you may mean by 'reality' is also open to discussion. Take, for instance, Goya's nominee *My Mexican Bretzel*. Apparently, director Nuria Giménez Lorang uses in it the home movies shot by her grandfather from the 1940s to the 1960s (footage which she found by chance), grafting onto these moving images the melodramatic story of her grandmother Vivian, a story which is, basically, invented. How is that a documentary?

Every time I try to think of some rule that fiction films and documentaries cannot break, there appears an exception perhaps because the two film languages have mixed in recent times. I had never noticed, for instance, that documentaries use music in ways very similar to fiction films, giving some scenes the tone of a thriller, or of melodrama, as the director wishes. Some scholars claim that, ultimately, the basis of the difference between a fiction film and a documentary is a matter of expectations: audiences expect to be told a story in fiction films, but to be enlightened about an aspect of reality they didn't know in documentaries (as if they were lessons). It doesn't work like this, either. Just think of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and how much one may learn from it about the Holocaust, even though it cannot be called at all a documentary film like, for instance, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). Actually, Spielberg's film created a big scandal by having the cameras enter the showers at Auschwitz, a moment that no other film, fictional or documentary, had dared recreate. Lanzmann was among the American director's most vocal critics. Yet, this is just a matter connected with historical taboos, not a matter of what films—fictional or documentary—can do.

You may recall that one year ago we were all fascinated by Netflix's documentary mini-series *Tiger King* (directed by Rebecca Chaiklin and Eric Goode). There was a hilarious moment (I can't recall whether it was in the series or in a bonus feature) in which Joe King fantasized about being played by Brad Pitt in a film about his life. That is hilarious not only because there are many obvious physical differences between King and Pitt, but because there is already a great film about King's life: the mini-series. In a similar vein, let me repeat a curious anecdote I just heard actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt narrate: Philippe Petite, the man who did walk between the Twin Towers, remember?, taught the actor that plays him in Ron Howard's film (i.e. Levitt) how to walk on a wire. This is bizarre, not only because just fancy the real-life man teaching the actor how to do what made him famous but also because, according to director James Marsh, Petite is a big narcissist that absolutely wanted to dominate the shooting of his documentary. Why Petite would feel interested in Gordon-Levitt's performance is something I fail to grasp. Was he flattered in some way? Why not jealous?

All in all, I am going to argue that what ultimately makes the difference between choosing to see a fiction film or a documentary film has to do with a specific element of the aesthetics of the fictional film: acting. *Moana*, the film by Flaherty I have mentioned, inaugurated docufiction on the sly, by including staged scenes. Without going so far, many documentaries include recreations of scenes of real life for which there is no footage, usually employing actors in a rather anonymous way, frequently cast just because they look like the real-life person they play. On the other hand, the docudrama is supposed to bridge the gap between the fiction film and the documentary by sticking as closely as possible to the 'truth' of events while still being presented as a fiction film.

Milk is a docudrama in that sense, and *The Walk*. I believe, however, that very few spectators think of films based on real-life events as docudramas, since the dramatic license many take is quite generous. I don't think any spectator is now as naïve as to think that a film wholly based on staged scenes can be trusted. This is why I am claiming that ultimately what gives the feature-length, live-action fiction film its popularity over the documentary is the audience's preference for acting to the point that given the choice between seeing a documentary with the real-life person and a docudrama with an actor playing that person, the latter is preferred.

What I have been discovering—or rediscovering—in the last year is that actor-dominated films (= fiction films) are not necessarily more entertaining, or more fulfilling, than narrative or argumentative films in which acting is non-existent or just used at the basic level of re-creation (= documentaries). Despite marvelling at how Tom Hanks plays classic children's TV star Mr. Rogers in Marielle Heller's *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (2019), this fiction film cannot compare to the far better documentary film by Morgan Neville, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018), also on Fred Rogers. Indeed, when Hanks and Heller saw together Neville's film, the actor asked the director why they were making their film at all… An obvious answer is that Hanks could attract viewers to the figure of Mr. Rogers in ways the far less known documentary by Neville could not, though this is not really a merit of fiction films (or of actors) but of their distribution channels. Now that we are used to finding so many documentaries on the streaming platforms the situation might change. My guess is that, if given the same visibility as fiction films, documentary films might grow to be just as popular and valued.

Here is, by the way, a very basic bibliography for documentaries in case you're interested:

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Enjoy! (And if you subscribe to Netflix, watch *Father, Soldier, Son*…).

12 April 2021/ GETTING PUBLISHED: SOME ADVICE FOR BEGINNERS (ON ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS)

This text is based on the seminar presentation I have prepared for the doctoral students in the PhD programme in English Studies of my Department. It is published here in case any other PhD student finds it useful.

'Why publish and should I…?', you may be wondering. Publication is an essential aspect of academic life: it is indeed the main method to present research results and new ideas (apart from teaching, attending conferences, giving talks…). Unlike what I was told when I was a PhD student myself (but never heeded), the sooner you start publishing, the better; remember that publications are, besides, a key component in accreditation processes in Spain. You may have heard, by the way, of 'impostor syndrome': you might

feel that you lack the authority to publish, but this authority is only acquired by publishing, so this is what you need to do. Academic writing, of course, is learned by reading, reading, and reading academic work, and understanding its conventions. Pay attention! To publish you need good academic skills, acquired during you BA and MA studies, but also a thick skin to stand criticism (which can be very harsh) and rejection.

Publication takes a minimum of six months from handing in your text to seeing it published, one year on average, and in some cases two years (or more). Thus, if you want to have one or two publications by the time you hand in your PhD dissertation, the second year might be a good time to begin. You may transform part of your future dissertation into an article; if this is published before you finish your thesis you can still use the text in it (with permission); indeed, some dissertations consist of a collection of previously published articles, though this is not a model we recommend in our programme (precisely because publication in the Humanities is a rather slow process). Writing an article for publication in the second year is also a way of testing your academic skills. If it is rejected, that is an experience you can also learn from… Please, note that our programme requires that you submit (not necessarily publish) an article to an indexed journal (= one that is acknowledged as significant in its field).

'Where should I start publishing?', you may be thinking. Please, note that I am speaking here of a journal publication, but (at least in Literary Studies) you might also start publishing by contributing a chapter to a collective volume (though this is usually less valued than an article). If you're working with a research group, you need to follow the research lines marked by the principal investigator (perhaps s/he is also your supervisor). In Spain, many of us in English Studies have started publishing in the online journal of the Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos (AEDEAN), *Atlantis*, which has quite a good reputation (it is what we call a B-list journal). Ask your supervisor for advice and use databases such as, for instance, MIAR to learn which journals might be a good choice for you, and how they are ranked. Yes, journals are ranked by performance (they are indexed).

MIAR, for instance, uses the ICDS index (Secondary Composite Index Broadcasting) which refers to the "visibility of the journal in different scientific databases of international scope or in repertoires evaluation of periodicals". MIAR awards points to each journal according to how visible it is in the Web of Science Core Collections and Web of Science classic (AHCI, SCIE, SSCI o ESCI), Scopus, and other abstract and indexing databases (specialized or multidisciplinary); international catalogues like Latindex or assessment lists (such as Catalan CARHUS Plus, European ERIHPlus or Spanish Sello de Calidad FECYT). Spanish database DIALNET is also taken into account and so is the "rate of survival of the journal, considering a maximum of 30 years in the calculation". Until recently, it might happen that the journal where you published an article was rated A+ but by the time you passed assessment, or applied for a scholarship, etc, the journal was down to C or D, and so was your article. Fortunately, this has been corrected now. By the way, each subject category of journals is sub-divided into four quartiles: Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4. Q1 corresponds to the top 25% journals; Q2 to the 25 to 50% group; Q3, 50 to 75% group; and Q4 to the bottom 75%-100% group. Logically, everybody wants to publish in the A+/Q1, journals but, unless you really are exceptionally talented, this is not really where you should begin; aspiring to publication in a B/Q2 journal is more advisable. Apart from MIAR, see our library's databases website here (and do ask your supervisor).

How a journal rates is called its 'impact factor' (IF) or 'journal impact factor' (JIF). Just for you to really understand the academic world we live in, Wikipedia explains that IF and JIF refer to "a scientometric index calculated by Clarivate that reflects the yearly average number of citations of articles published in the last two years in a given journal". Wikipedia further informs that Eugene Garfield, founder of the Institute for Scientific

Information (ISI), invented the impact factor. This has been calculated yearly since 1975 "for journals listed in the Journal Citation Reports (JCR)". So what is Clarivate? Well, because of a series of financial operations, JCR is now the property of private corporation Clarivate, established by the Onex Corporation and the Baring Private Equity Asia. Check this website and infer whatever you need to infer from this. It is assumed, in any case, that the higher the ranking, the better positioned the journal is and the more authors it attracts, being able to select the very best. However, many scholars dispute that the highest ranking journals are really the best in their field (and what happens when their field is very small, like Medieval Catalan Literature?). Perhaps all this is talk for another seminar.

'But… how do I really start publishing?', you may be wondering. There are, I think, three main ways. A) You write an article on your own initiative and send it to a journal. B) You attend a conference and the paper you present is further developed into an article which either you send to a journal or is included in a publication derived from the conference (monographic journal issue, proceedings, collective book). C) You respond to a call for papers (cfp) sent by an editor seeking contributors (to a monographic journal issue, or a collective volume). How do you get cfps? You join an association (such as AEDEAN), or a mailing list, or browse specialised websites (such as this one). This is important: you need to be very active in your search for journals and cfps, they will not simply come to you.

A few other notes, a bit randomly. Are you supposed to pay for publication? No, even though this is not uncommon in other fields, and not unheard of for books in ours. Will you be paid for publication? No, the only type of publication for which you might get royalties are books. What is Open Access? A European Union mandate indicates that academic publication should be ideally freely available online, this is what Open Access means. Online journals follow this mandate and I personally prefer open access because it gives more visibility to my work, though it must be noted that the highest ranking journals are usually only accessible through the very expensive databases to which universities subscribe. Some publishers sell Open Access, that is to say, they allow you to publish online work you have already published for them–for a fee. How about the digital repository at UAB? (Dipòsit Digital de Documentació, ddd.uab.cat). I do publish a lot at DDD, but this is considered self-publication and, therefore, useless for official validation or accreditation. You can use, however, DDD to publish work in progress, or other work usually not accepted directly for publication (such as conference presentations).

Once you have chosen the journal to which you want to submit your article, you need to edit it according to their guide for authors. Make sure you absolutely respect their preferred word count (articles and book chapters range from 4500 to 10000 words, though 7000-8000 is the more habitual length). Follow the journal's (or book editor's) instructions to submit: in some cases this just involves sending an email, in others you need to use a specific online application. You need to send your article anonymised (with no indication of who you are); the abstract and keywords are habitually sent in a separate document, usually with your name in it and contact information. Make sure you receive an acknowledgement of receipt; if you don't, contact the journal/book editor within the week following your submission. A very important rule is that you cannot send your article simultaneously to several journals; you need to wait for a journal's negative decision to try another journal. I am not 100% sure why this is the case, since it slows down very much the process of publication, but apparently this is to avoid having many peer reviewers assessing the same text (or the same reviewer assessing it for two journals).

Once you submit your article (or book chapter) the editor will send it to the reviewers, who will review it anonymously. This is the process known as blind peer reviewing. The number of reviewers used to be three, but is now down to two, and in

some cases one. The journal (or book editor) should contact you in a reasonable period of time (ideally, a few weeks, usually a few months) and email you the reviews. Of course, the higher ranking journals take longer to review articles as they get many submissions. Some reviewers write some notes, others long reports (I usually also send the text submitted with corrections and notes). Three things may happen: a) your article is accepted with no further revision (very rare…); b) your article is accepted but you're asked to revise it before re-submitting; c) your article is rejected (in that case, you are free to send it elsewhere). Rejection is common, and reviewers' reports can be very harsh. Be ready for that! Do not reply to rejection emails with negative, rude comments. Just say thanks, move on and send the article elsewhere. If you have been asked to revise your article, this usually means that the journal is interested, though it might well be that your second (or third, or fourth) revision is finally rejected. It happens to all of us! Be patient and stay calm!!! The reviewers may ask you to simply rewrite some passages, or add certain quotations and sources, but in some cases revision might be extensive and require substantial rewriting. This is part of the process. Always keep the different versions of the texts revised, just in case you need to go back to any of them (number or date them). If you do not agree with certain aspects of the peer reviewing, you may discuss them with the editor but be ready to accept his/her opinion, and do as you're told.

Once your article (or book chapter) is accepted, the editor will contact you next to proof-read it (= to check that the text sent for publication has no errors). At this stage, you may not change your article/book chapter substantially; you can only correct spelling or punctuation mistakes, some occasional vocabulary and grammar errors. Once your text is published, you should get the .pdf (article) and ideally a hard copy of the book (for a chapter), and of course add it to your CV. Published authors track their citation impact index through Web of Science, Scopus, or Google Scholar. The more you publish, and the more you're quoted, the higher your citation index will be. Of course, I always wonder whether the trick is to publish something controversial but rather foolish so that everyone cites you to explain how wrong you are. That also increases your citation index!

There are no hard and fast rules about how much a doctoral student should publish. I would recommend two publications (at least accepted) before submitting your PhD (two publications in three to five years is feasible). Publishing in books of proceedings derived from a conference is not well valued today, not even when the editors stress there has been a peer-reviewed assessment of the texts. And, yes, journal articles are valued above book chapters because supposedly, peer reviewing is more 'serious' in articles (I don't agree with this). Co-authorship, by the way, is common in the sciences (including Linguistics) but not in Literary Studies (in which usually collaboration is limited to two authors, very rarely more). If you're planning to get an accreditation as a [Lector](#) in the Catalan system or [Profesor Contratado Doctor](#) in the Spanish system, check the publication requirements now, so that you can plan your career in advance. And don't forget to open an account at Research Gate or Academia.edu, to follow what other researchers in your field are doing.

Now, some notes on my personal experience. I have been publishing since 1994 (my first publication was a paper I wrote for a course in my doctoral programme) and it never gets any easier. I have never had a straightforward acceptance with no revisions, no matter how minor, though I must say that I have published everything I have written in close to 100 articles and book chapters (and some books). I am used to having my articles rejected, sometimes in very harsh ways: my article on Sirius in *Harry Potter*, got six *furious* rejections (it is now a chapter in one of my books). I have had two 'desk rejections' recently (meaning that my article did not go past the editor, who refused to send it to peer reviewers, in one case with no explanation at all). Most of my reviewers have been very kind persons who have helped me very much to improve my work; some,

believe me, were haters who should never have reviewed any papers. I consider peer reviewing *very necessary* but I am against its anonymity, precisely because it gives room to too harsh comments. When I peer-review an article that I don't like, I write the report as if I had to meet the author in person. I have peer-reviewed some articles that were simply terrible, usually coming from inexperienced authors (one can guess that) so please, ask your supervisor and other experienced researchers to read your work before you send it, at least at the beginning of your career.

You may find it frustrating (as I do, to be honest) to follow the conventions of academic prose, but this is absolutely necessary, otherwise you will never get published. I myself keep this blog to write on academic themes in a free style, and without supervision from reviewers. I recommend that you do that, too. Writing a blog is NOT hard work, but fun!! You should enjoy writing about what you are learning for your PhD dissertation, even if nobody else is interested.

Good luck, may your citation index grows to be very high!

19 April 2021/ GETTING PUBLISHED: SOME ADVICE FOR BEGINNERS (ON BOOKS)

This post in, once more, based on the seminar for the doctoral students in the PhD programme in English Studies of my Department to which I referred in my previous post. There I voiced my own ideas, here I borrow heavily from my colleague Eva Codó's presentation on how to transform your PhD into a book (thanks Eva!), mixed with my own experience.

Writing a PhD dissertation takes from 3 to 5 years on average (this can be extended if you're a part-time student, though it is not really advisable). During these years you should start publishing articles in indexed journals and chapters in collective academic books, as I explained in the previous post, beginning in the second year. I am well aware that combining the effort required to write a 300-page-long dissertation with the effort required to write at least a couple of 25-page-long articles is daunting, but this is why we advise you to use part of the dissertation for those publications (you can always include a version of your publications in your thesis, with due acknowledgements; this is not self-plagiarising).

Once your dissertation has been submitted and has passed the assessment of your tribunal, that's it, you're a doctor! Spanish universities have an official mandate to upload online all the dissertations they produce (see www.tdx.cat, the repository of the Catalan universities as an example of how this is done) and, therefore, you will be asked to submit your dissertation (minus the typos!) for that. I know that in other countries this is not done, precisely to prevent academic publishing houses from rejecting dissertations as possible books. However, here in Spain we take into account that a) not all doctors transform their dissertations into books, b) a book based on a dissertation needs to be substantially different from the dissertation itself. The English Literature section of the programme I work for recommends that PhD candidates produce dissertations as close as possible to publishable monographs (a monograph is a book-length essay by one author), but even so there is very little chance that a publisher will accept a PhD dissertation as it is, with all the extensive theoretical framework, the many notes and so on.

My own doctoral dissertation, submitted in 1996, is available online (my university produced, believe it or not, a scanned version of the printed text!) and you will see if you check it that it is long (450 pages, plus 150 pages for diverse appendixes). I did try to

have it published but failed precisely because I was told by all publishers I contacted that it was too long; nobody offered to accept only part of it. In fact, one publisher did accept it whole but the person I asked for advice (an American Fulbright scholar visiting our Department) told me that this was considered a vanity press, that is, a low-prestige publisher without a solid academic criteria that accepts any text, sometimes charging for publication. And, so, I rejected their offer without further checking their credentials, which were not at all that bad. In hindsight, I think that was a serious mistake, for a book publication would have been better than none, but I just did not have anyone who could guide me better. I did publish a sort of popular version of my thesis in Spanish, for a general readership, but even though that was a good experience which gave me a name in fandom circles beyond academia, this is not a road I would advise you to take. We are currently focused on academic validity and this type of excursion outside academic publication is not welcome. I do not regret my own excursion, though, from which I have got in the long run plenty of academic benefit.

At the end of 3 or 5 years working on your dissertation you will probably feel exhausted and little inclined to work 2 or 3 more years on your monograph. Let me tell you, however, that you might never get the chance to publish a book again, not even if you become a successful scholar. The duties connected with teaching and the preference in official assessment for peer-reviewed journal articles make it very difficult to find time for book-length work. If you pay attention, you will see that most books these days are either collective volumes or publications derived from PhD dissertations. My impression is that only a handful of extremely committed, prolific authors manage to have a career which includes three books or more. I myself felt very unhappy with myself for not having a monograph in English, though I have edited collective volumes and have some books in Spanish. When I managed to publish *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* as recently as 2019, I felt much better. This volume closed the gap left by the non-publication of my dissertation. In fact, it comes from one of its chapters, so you see how long we can go on working on our doctoral research. Mine, I know, is not over yet.

So, having established that publishing your dissertation as a book is a very good idea, let me tell you how to proceed. Here's the first tricky matter. As I explained in my previous post, the impact factor helps you to understand how each journal is rated, but for books this is not so clear. The database SPI (Scholarly Publishing Indicators) can help you to navigate the field and have a more or less clear idea of who the major publishers are. But be careful! Their section 'Lingüística, Literatura y Filología' mixes fields which are in fact too diverse. I would not send a proposal for a book on Literary Studies to De Gruyter or John Benjamins Publishing Company, which I connect with Linguistics, and I wonder that Palgrave Macmillan is number 12 in the list, as I think it is much higher by prestige. Anyway, your reading for the dissertation should give you a clear idea of which university presses publish the most relevant authors and titles. However, don't make the mistake of thinking, for instance, that publishing in Duke University Press (39 in the SPI list) is not worth it, and you should only aim at publication at number one, Oxford University Press. As happens Duke UP is a great publishing house, like others lower in that list.

A key matter in that sense are collections. Academic publishing houses do publish stand-alone books, but they tend to organize their publications into series about a particular topic, which is what collections are (yes, they are also called series). Let me give you an example. If you are, as I am, into science fiction and want to publish a monograph, then the best series is the Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies by the University of Liverpool Press (which is actually run by Oxford University Press). This series is edited by two very well-known scholars in the field, David Seed and Sheryl Vint, and has an editorial board of six other very well-known scholars. If you check the

webpage, you will see that you are invited to contact them through a Commissioning Editor, that is to say, the person in charge of the series on behalf of the publishers, Liverpool UP. She will consider your proposal and pass it onto the editors, who have the last word about their admission for publication. If your proposal is accepted, then either Prof. Seed or Prof. Vint will supervise your text. But before we go to that, let me tell you about the proposal.

Once you have chosen the series (or collection) you future book might fit, you need to produce a proposal. All publishers offer guidance through a proposal submission form, which tells you which steps you should follow (see here for instance for the series I have mentioned). Filling in a proposal is a first exercise in the marketing of your book, for here is where you have to 'sell' it, explaining what it is about, and describing its main saleable features. The publisher you target will want to know who might be interested in your book, what competitors is has, and so on. Writing an attractive description is, therefore, very important; this goes beyond simply writing an abstract, which tends to be a text addressed to other scholars, not to a publisher. When you write a proposal you need to ask yourself 'why would this publisher want to issue my book at all?' and you need to persuade them (but always use formal language!). Correct me if I am wrong, but I think that in the case of books, you can indeed send your proposal to several publishers, though perhaps it is more elegant to wait for a (possible) rejection before you try another one. And, of course, you need to accompany your proposal with a sample text, ideally one chapter.

Your proposal will be assessed by the series' editor(s), and perhaps by other anonymous reviewers. Make sure you understand their instructions and modify your text accordingly, because you don't want to rewrite substantially and then be told that you need to rewrite again. Your text will pass another review before publication and, of course, you will have to proofread it once it goes through the copy editor that checks errors (though not all publishers offer this service and some might demand that you pay for professional help). This varies with each publisher but make sure you negotiate a sufficiently generous deadline, so that you don't find yourself awfully stressed. Please, note that depending on how much rewriting you need to do, and your work-related situation, this might take one or two years, during which you're still expected to publish articles if you're really committed to having an academic career. And, by the way, a tricky part of any book is the index—make sure you understand how to produce one, or be ready to employ paid help.

When your manuscript is ready, or almost ready, your publisher will ask you to supply back cover blurbs (usually one by you, a couple by prestige scholars in your field), and a list of journals where your book could be reviewed. Getting reviews is important, much more so if these reviews appear in A-listed journals but, don't be, on the whole too optimistic about impact. Academic books are usually published as hardbacks costing between 100 and 200 euros, accompanied by a much cheaper e-book edition that, anyway, is expensive at around 35 euros. This means that an average academic book might sell 100 to 200 copies, bought mostly by university libraries, with royalties for the author of about 200 euros, if you're lucky! Titles that sell reasonably well as hardbacks might be re-printed in one or two years as paperbacks, at a price between 25 and 35 euros, but, again, don't think you're going to make a lot of money out of that. My impression, however, is that in the Humanities no matter how many articles and book chapters you have published, what really makes you respected as a scholar are the books. I don't think you get invitations, for instance. to be a plenary speaker at a conference without them.

When I started my own academic career, I imagined it as a process full of books, not of articles and book chapters. As a marvellous example of what I really wanted, please check the profile of my former student at UAB, Xavier Reyes Aldana, now a leading

authority in Gothic Studies. Xavi's many books as author and editor come, however, at a price. I really thought that academic careers were developed in a slow tempo, and that my books would come out regularly every three or four years. In fact, academic careers are now hectic, and if Xavi has produced so much this is not only because he is very talented but because he has submitted himself to the high pressure of British academia, which is very dangerous in terms of health (as he knows very well).

I'll finish by explaining that in the Anglophone world, where researchers are expected to write books, they teach relatively short semesters. Here, our much longer semesters make writing books almost impossible. At the same time, this is now expected of us. CNEAI, the agency that assess our publications every six years (for the 'sexenios') regards books as just one of the five publications you need to present, even though a 100,000 word book is clearly much more work than a 5,000 word article. However, the current accreditations for tenure (=indefinite contracts) expect candidates to have already published a monograph. This can only be, given the time constrains, a book based on your dissertation.

I hope all this has been useful. Please, leave comments if there is any doubt. May you publish many books!

26 April 2021/ READING MEN'S BOOKS ON MASCULINITY: BARKER, BOLA, KAUFMAN (AND FARRELL)

Raewyn Connell warned in *Masculinities* (1995, 2006) that we must recognise not only the diverse masculinities but also "the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination" because "There is a gender politics within masculinity" (37, original emphasis). As she theorized, masculinity is divided into hegemonic, subordinated and complicit, a division that on the whole is useful to understand the workings of patriarchal masculinity, but that does not take into account the diverse anti-patriarchal masculinities. In fact, though Connell takes it for granted that hegemonic masculinity can be altered and eventually replaced with a different model by resisting it, she tends to forget that, as Foucault stressed in his theorization of power (in *The History of Sexuality, vol. I: The Will to Knowledge*, 1986), "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95), meaning that patriarchy's resistance actually comes from the inside as men awaken to their own oppression and defect. The "points of resistance", Foucault adds, are "everywhere in the power network" though they can hardly result in a "locus of great Refusal" (96). I'll argue that this is what is happening within anti-patriarchal masculinity. It is building up, though not as a sweeping movement.

I've been reading these past weeks a few books, all published in 2019, that speak of that awakening from a variety of positions. Phil Barker's *The Revolution of Man: Rethinking What It Means to Be a Man* is a volume by an Australian journalist addressing the men of his nation in a candid, accessible tone aimed at increasing rapport. One needs to love a book that includes a few recipes to convince men of the pleasures of caring for others! J.J. Bola's *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined* has been written for British young men by a black former refugee from Congo (his family migrated to the UK when he was 6), who is now a poet and novelist after being for many years a youth educator. Bola is also a UN advisor on refugee matters. Michael Kaufman's *The Time Has Come: Why Men Must Join the Gender Equality Revolution* is a book by the US-born Canadian co-founder of the White Ribbon campaign against the violence against women (in 1989). Kaufman is

one of the founding fathers of Masculinities Studies, a writer, scholar, and activist. To compensate for the anti-patriarchal tone of these three men, I have also read the 20th anniversary edition of Warren Farrell's Bible for US Men's Rights activism, *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* (1991, 2011). To put myself outside my comfort zone.

You may have frequently heard that men are from Mars, women from Venus, as John Gray's 1992 best-selling book proclaimed, but having read these four books, it is far more accurate to say that although all live on Earth, some men appear to live on different planets (I'll leave the women aside, for the time being). You will have noticed that the men living in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada apparently belong to a progressive pro-feminist, anti-patriarchal world, whereas in the USA misogyny is making the fastest inroads. Just last week, for instance, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) asked the Supreme Court to revise Rostker v. Goldberg (1981), the case which argued that male-only draft is discriminatory and unconstitutional, and which the judges rejected on the grounds that women were excluded from combat. Since 2013, however, women have been allowed to serve in combat (with restrictions), hence the ACLU's petition. But here's the hidden barb. This organization, presided by a woman, is actually speaking on behalf of the National Coalition for Men, who already won a similar case in 2019, when a Texan judge declared unconstitutional the limitation of the Selective Service System by which all male US citizens aged 18-25 need to register with the Government who may then draft them for combat. Although the ACLU, which has a pro-feminist record, claims that "Limiting registration to men treats women as unfit for this obligation of citizenship and reflects the outmoded belief that men aren't qualified to be caregivers in the event of a draft", other feminists have noted that a) the NCM has not cared to help women get equality in any other fields, and b) if the NCM really wanted to protect men, they would ensure no young man is drafted. This case is not about granting women equality, clearly, but about subjecting them to the same ill-treatment male citizens are receiving from their Government. This is how patriarchy works.

Allow me to cite from passages from the books by Barker, Bola and Kaufman, and then I'll move onto Farrell to end. Let me mention that Barker's volume has a chapter called "The Woman Haters" in which he describes the Men's Rights Activists inspired by Farrell as "a bizarre, hilarious and terrifying phenomenon bubbling up in society as a direct result of Man Box pressures defining young men's lives" (41). It is important to say this because criticism of the MRAs does not always come from (feminist) women. Men like Barker have not been brainwashed by feminism but, as he shows, by patriarchy; this is why, once they are free from that burden, it is important that they themselves try to wean other men from the pernicious patriarchal ideology. Both MRAs and progressive men agree that too many men are dying or being harmed by the pressure put on them, though MRAs usually fail to see that this pressure comes from patriarchy, not from women. Barker, who writes that "Women deserve a world of better men" (191), calls for men to use their "beautiful, big, strong man bodies" for good. "Our strength is our weakness", he argues, "because it allows us to impose our will over others. The belief that it's okay to do so comes from the Man Box" (197), that is to say, from the narrow mental space in which patriarchy keeps men. He asks fellow men, therefore, to never use their physical power for violence but "to care for those we love", resisting the "corruptible influence of power" (198). As he concludes, "It's not too much to ask for a little self-control, is it?" (198). I really think this a key point: admirable as men's bodies can be, we see them these days mainly as a potential source of violence rather than of care; this needs to change, above all, for men's sake.

J.J. Bola called his book *Mask Off* because "men are taught to wear a mask, a façade that covers up how we are really feeling and the issues we are faced with from a young age" (8). As he warns, "the same system that puts men at an advantage in society

is essentially the same system that limits them; inhibits their growth and eventually leads to their break down" (8). I was extremely happy and relieved to come across a passage by a man in which he insists, as I have been doing for many years that "Masculinity is not patriarchy. And while patriarchy is an oppressive structure that imposes the dominance of one gender over another, we must imagine and manifest a masculinity that is not reliant on patriarchy to exist; a masculinity that sees the necessity of the equality of genders for it to not only survive, but to thrive" (20-21). Like Barker and Kaufman, Bola stresses the advantages of feminism for men, claiming that this movement is "actually beneficial to men as it seeks to heal men and remove the pressures that patriarchal society places on them" (66) thus literally saving lives lost to violence and suicide. Bola advises men to let go of the anger that so often dominates their lives because only anger is accepted as a proper emotion by patriarchy, and to shed their mask, and see who they really are (and, yes, he recommends Jennifer Siebel's excellent documentary *The Mask You Live In*, 2015).

Kaufman's *The Time Has Come: Why Men Must Join the Gender Equality Revolution* seems to have been written in reply to a comment in Connell's *Masculinities* in which she concludes that 1970s-1980s Men's Liberation was a "tidal wave of historical change" that "broke" (241) and was never rebuilt. She writes that "We now speak of a 'men's movement' partly from politeness, and partly because certain activities have the form of a social movement", yet she denies that "the project of transforming masculinity" has any "political weight at all" (with the exception of the gay activism arising from the 1980s AIDS crisis). Kaufman, co-founder as I have noted of the White Ribbon campaign, is far more optimistic, this is why he addresses his book to the men willing to join "the greatest revolution in human history: the work to win women's rights, gender justice, and gender equality" (22). Like Barker and Bola, Kaufman insists that the struggle not only benefits women but also men because "feminism is the greatest gift that men have ever received" (22), in view of how women's demand for equality also frees men from their obligations towards patriarchal masculinity.

I find it thought-provoking that Barker and Kaufman coincide with Farrell in seeing the renewal of fatherhood as the key to a new masculinity. Barker enthuses about his own father and praises to the skies his daughter for the marvelous relationship he has with her, whereas Kaufman writes that "the single biggest way men will contribute to gender equality and the single most important and positive change that men are enjoying" (175) is what he calls the Dad Shift. Kaufman even argues that "The transformation of fatherhood will be, for men, what feminism has been for women. It is the thing that is redefining our lives in a powerful, life-affirming, forward-moving way" (76), which is not so far from what Warren Farrell writes in his own volume, though the perspective is quite different. I must confess that I was quite surprised by this, until I realized that whereas I have no problem imagining young women as future mothers, I have many problems imagining young men as future fathers.

What Kaufman means is that by integrating caregiving into boys' lives as we do into girls' lives we will allow their nurturing skills to develop, which can only result in the prevention of the violence associated to bullying patriarchal masculinity. "Just as I believe", Kaufman writes, "that transforming fatherhood will prove to be the single greatest contribution by men to achieving gender equality, it may well be the thing that makes the biggest contribution to reducing men's violence—both against women and against other men" (118). Logically, this raises the question of how men who are not interested in fatherhood fit this view of an egalitarian masculinity but Kaufman calls, above all, for making caregiving central in men's lives, as it is in women's lives. My concern is that call comes too late, when many women in the younger generation are rejecting caregiving as a burden imposed on them by patriarchy and when many young persons are declaring their intention not to have children.

Warren Farrell, as he narrates in his prologue to the second edition of *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* used to be a staunch feminist until he went through a deep crisis that left him wondering what actual amount of power individual men have. I have only understood recently that radical feminism's misguided rejection of all men as a privileged class comes from the Marxist view of class struggle. I must, therefore, agree with Farrell (and with Michael Kimmel) when he says that though men appear to be more powerful than women as a class, they are not necessarily powerful on an individual basis. What Kimmel sees but Farrell is totally blind to is that this is because of patriarchy, the hierarchical organization that allows a circle of privileged men to dominate most women and many other men. As I have noted, Farrell coincides with Kaufman in seeing fathering as "the only career that will last a lifetime" (40) for men, in view of the changing conditions of the job market. Yet, Farrell is so full of spite against women and feminism that it is hard to see how men and women can be co-parents of a child (leaving aside the absence of other types of couples in his book). Showing his true colours, in his conclusion Farrell writes that "Ideally there should not be a men's movement but a gender transition movement; only the power of the women's movement necessitates the *temporary corrective* of a men's movement" (591, my italics). Of course, he doesn't mean the type of men's movement that Connell had in mind, but an anti-feminist movement. As for the word 'corrective' I cannot help thinking of a few macho men spanking the feminist girls for having been so naughty.

Reading Farrell, I understand where many of the ideas defended by the anti-feminist extreme right come from, which is why I think his book should be read by feminists like me. Also, by anti-patriarchal male activists. We need all the strength of a solid rhetoric to persuade whoever listens to us that ours if the better future and the only one that guarantees human rights.

3 May 2021/ NO PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?: MASCULINITY IN SCIENCE FICTION

This is a self-translation of my part of the article originally in Catalan which I have just published with Miquel Codony on the website El Biblionauta. I have not translated Miquel's section but comment on it at the end of my own text.

I have been working on gender and science fiction for a long time from a feminist point of view and I need, therefore, to constantly reflect on the place of women authors and on the representation of female characters in this field. In 2008 I published an introductory piece on this subject, "Mujeres y ciencia ficción", which was followed by a more formal article in 2010, with a very similar title, "Mujeres en la literatura de ciencia ficción: entre la escritura y el feminismo". I have recently written the article originally in Catalan "The ethical impact of robotics and digital technologies: Carme Torras, from *The Vestigial Heart* to *Enxarxats*"–for the monographic issue of the *Catalan Review* on current Catalan SF, which I currently co-edit with Víctor Martínez-Gil and should be published in 2022–and in this article I make the first academic reflection on the place of women in this genre and in this language. According to my own figures, the Catalan female authors of SF are around 20-25% of the total and, thus, you can speak without a doubt about women's Catalan SF.

The problem is that when thinking about women and femininity, we tend to lose sight of how men treat masculinity and whether there have been recent changes. I've been doing Masculinity Studies for a couple of decades now, but I didn't understand a very important question until I wrote in 2016 an article about *Black Man* (2007), a remarkable novel by British author Richard K. Morgan, known for the trilogy about

Takeshi Kovacs (*Altered Carbon* 2002, *Broken Angels* 2003, *Woken Furies* 2005). I complained in this article that Morgan allows his monstrous hero, Carl Marsalis, to make a deep and totally pertinent reflection on the patriarchal evil that power-hungry men do, but he does not let this man seek justice for all, only allowing him to take revenge at a personal level. The author told me in an [interview](#) that all his heroes are great individualists, but when one of the peer reviewers of my article (published in *Science Fiction Studies*) asked me why it was not possible to imagine Marsalis as the leader of a social change beyond what Morgan claimed, I finally realized that this is the main question: while women often feel attracted to science fiction because it imagines a better future for us, which we might call post-feminist, men do not have a vision for the future about masculinity nor plans to change it, which is why they are trapped in the individualist vision Morgan expresses even when they have a clear anti-patriarchal stance. Most women, I would add, are striving to achieve the utopia promised by feminism, but men do not have a utopian horizon that motivates them to improve for the future as men. There are simply no plans.

Traditional Golden Age science fiction fulfilled part of this function, full as it was of scientific heroes and space explorers who inspired many young readers personally and professionally. I think, however, that since the 1950s there are already signs that something was breaking in the field of masculinity, perhaps related to the massive trauma of World War II, a conflict which transformed many ordinary good men into murderers but forced them to keep silent about how they felt (the Vietnam War ended this enforced silence). This had already happened in World War I but the scale of WWII was bigger and included, let's not forget, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is no coincidence, I think, that one of the most unpleasant male characters I have ever come across is neurosurgeon and World War III (yes, III) refugee Dr. Martine in Bernard Wolfe's novel *Limbo* (1952, available in the SF Masterworks collection). I haven't checked my hypothesis in depth but my impression is that the portrait of male characters in SF has never recovered the positive tone of the technophilic science fiction from the Golden Age, and never will.

One might think that this issue is closely related to the emergence of second-wave feminism in the mid-1960s and the revolution that texts such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) meant from the 1970s onwards in the treatment of gender. I think, however, that the war waged by the female authors has never consisted of attacking the representation of masculinity in their works (well, some have done that) but mostly of improving the view of femininity in the SF by men. And I think this is a war that has been won. I still find sexism and misogyny in some of the 21st century SF novels written by men, with presentations of female characters that refer to their body and sexuality above all else, but in general professional, efficient, strong women abound in all these imaginary futures. David Weber, the American author of military SF, has a long series of fourteen novels (begun in 1992) about Officer Honor Harrington, a woman who climbs up the ranks of the Space Fleet to the highest level. It could be said that women like Harrington are essentially male characters with a woman's body, but what matters here is that both Weber and many other male authors are perfectly capable of writing SF about female characters admired by men and women. On the contrary, that men write SF about admirable men no longer happens, or seldom.

Richard Morgan told me that his heroes are dangerous men I wouldn't want to have coffee with, and since that conversation I run the 'coffee test' whenever I read a SF novel starring a man–would I want to meet him for coffee? I would certainly like to meet Miles Vorkosigan, protagonist of the very long saga published since 1986 by Lois McMaster Bujold; Fassin Taak, hero of Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist* (2008); and Fitz Wahram, the main male character of *2312* (2012), a novel by Kim Stanley Robinson. The rest of them don't interest me that much, or disturb me, or scare me... Without going so far, these are in many cases men with serious deficiencies when it comes to socializing,

almost always clumsy in relations with women, and with a not very seductive profile. Some still play heroic roles, such as *Pandora's Star's* Wilson Kime (2004) by Peter Hamilton, or Jim Holden from James S. A. Corey's series *Expanse* (2011-), but not many more; and I should certainly mention the serious shortcomings of these and other male characters. Holden, for instance, congratulates himself on his honourability in a scene from *Leviathan Wakes* (2011) in which he celebrates not having abused sexually a woman under his command who is too drunk to give her consent. Ramez Naan's *Nexus* (2012) begins with a distasteful scene in which the protagonist Kaden Lane, presented as an engineering genius, practically rapes the woman he is having sex with. I'm frankly surprised at how many male protagonists are not people I would like to meet and the question is whether this is a shared impression (it is for many GoodReads readers). Where, in short, are the great male characters of 21st century SF, the men of the future?

In fact, I would say that the authors are using SF not to imagine a positive and admirable future for masculinity but to deal with the insecurities and fears of today's men. For example, in Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* (2016), physicist and engineer Jason Dessen has a very bad time trying to return to the universe where he is a good father and husband when he is impersonated by another man. In Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), the protagonist—who also goes by the name Charles Yu—is stalled in a temporary loop he cannot leave unless he finds his father, lost in another temporary loop. In *Spin* (2005), Robert Charles Wilson's beautiful novel, melancholic Tyler Dupree can't get the woman he loves (and who loves him) because he doesn't know how to make her see that nothing really separates them. In Peter Watts' *Blindsight* (2006), Siri Keeton loses half his brain to prevent deep epilepsy and the result is a man who understands the patterns of human behaviour but feels no empathy at all. I could go on... Perhaps the worst thing is that when authors try to write an attractive hero in the old style, with self-confidence and even personal beauty, this either sounds false or results in totally unbearable types, such as the repellent Darrow in Pierce Brown's *Red Rising* (2014). And if you liked Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) I am sorry to say that in *Ready Player Two* (2020) the rather nice hero Wade Watts becomes a dangerous, selfish man that totally outdoes Elon Musk with his supposedly benevolent plans for world domination.

Since here I am talking about science fiction originally in English because this is the territory which I know better I invited my Biblionauta colleague Miquel Codony to give his view of Catalan SF for the article, which then became a joint effort. Miquel expressed some doubts about whether my approach is too reductive and my thesis a sweeping statement (I am sure he is right!). My questions might not be the relevant questions–indeed, I asked myself as I wrote why SF male authors should be made responsible for regenerating masculinity, since nobody else seems to be interested (except women!). Anyway, Miquel found in *Michelíada* (2015) by Antoni Munné-Jordà (a clever retelling of the Homeric *Illiad*) and in the space opera *Adzum i els monoculars* (2020) by Sergi G. Oset, a satirical vein opposing heroic hypermasculinization. He also found humour, in this case at the expense of the anti-hero trapped by apocalyptic catastrophe, in Marc Pastor's *L'any de la plaga* (2010). Miquel also mentions "a sophistication of the emotional scenarios" usually allowed to male characters in alternate history within Catalan SF, highlighting *Els ambaixadors* (2014) by Albert Villaró and *Jo soc aquell que va matar Franco* (2018) by Joan-Lluís Lluís. His conclusion is that the representation of the male characters by male authors in Catalan SF is now "being filled with nuances and variations that respond to a transformation—without direction, perhaps, chaotic and insufficient—of the meaning of one's own perception of masculinity in our society".

I'll finish by citing Raewyn Connell's classic *Masculinities* (2005). "In the first moment of Men's Liberation", by which she means the 1970s and 1980s, "activists could believe themselves borne forward on a tidal wave of historical change. The wave broke,

and no means of further progress was left on the beach". What follows is quite harsh: "We now speak of a 'men's movement' partly from politeness, and partly because certain activities have the form of a social movement. But taking a cool look around the political scenery of the industrial capitalist world, we must conclude that the project of transforming masculinity has almost no political weight at all–no leverage on public policy, no organizational resources, no popular base and no presence in mass culture (except as a footnote to feminism in a critique of the excesses of masculinity therapy)". No wonder, then, that not even the SF written by men can imagine a bright future for a renewed masculinity, finally free from patriarchy.

10 May 2021/ WRITING A REVIEW OF AN ACADEMIC BOOK: A FEW TIPS

I find book reviews a very hard genre to write. This is why I marvel every time I come across great reviews in GoodReads that cover plenty of ground in just a few paragraphs, written apparently by readers who simply enjoy sharing their opinions. It has come to a point in my own reading when I hardly take up a book without first checking what the GoodRead members have to say—or in which, lazily, I check their opinions when I sense something is off with a book but cannot be bothered to think for myself. I do have a GoodReads account but I have never posted a review precisely because I need plenty of motivation to write them. My reviews, besides, would simply amount to 'Yes, read the book' or 'Please, avoid', with no further nuance. I would not get many likes for them.

I happen to believe, however, that all serious scholars have the duty to review academic books now and then. I started in 1997 and have reviewed since then 25 books, so about one volume a year. I have just handed in my 25th review, the reason behind my post today. I wrote my first review once I was already a doctor but there is no reason why doctoral students cannot write reviews, I think. It just happened that my supervisor(s) never spoke to me of that possibility. My dear colleague Felicity Hand, then editing an issue of our defunct Department journal *Links & Letters*, was the person who convinced me that I could and should write a review. To be honest, I was terrified because the book she gave was a collective volume edited by a person I happen to have much respect for, and I did not see how I was authorized at all to offer an opinion on her work. What if I didn't like her book? This is indeed a difficulty when writing reviews early in your career: a negative review can make you enemies. I know of a doctoral student who had the great idea of reviewing in negative terms a collective volume in which most academics in his field participated, including some in his own research group. I can tell you he did not endear himself to any of the authors. So, even though what I am going to say will sound rather awful and hypocritical, as a general rule only review books that you enjoy and of which you can write positive reviews.

In that sense, I have got lucky because I have enjoyed all the books I have reviewed, even when I asked for them not knowing whether I would like them (with one exception, see below). Sorry, I have forgotten to clarify that you may send an unsolicited review directly to a journal (most journals have a review editor) or ask to review a book from their list. When a scholar publishes a book, s/he sends the publishers a list of journals where the volume could be reviewed. The publishers offer then review copies to the journals, which keep lists. In my area, *Science Fiction Studies*, the *Science Fiction Review*, *Extrapolation* and other journals regularly publish their lists of books for review, which I get through diverse mailing lists. If I see an attractive title, I ask for it. The Spanish journal *Nexus*, by the way, also keeps a list of books for review. If you want to review a book that you have already read, it would be a good idea in any case to contact the

journal where you want to publish to ask whether they would be interested. Not all journals welcome unsolicited reviews.

It is not a very good idea to review books by persons you know, from best friends to mere acquaintances, unless you are sure a negative review might not be a problem. A negative review of a book by a senior scholar who might be important in your future career is not, as I have noted, the kind of review you want to write. But a bad review of a friend's book can lose you a friend, remember that too. Do I mean that you should write positive reviews always whether you like a book or not? No! What I'm saying is that you should try to review only books which you value as good books, regardless of who the author is.

Look what happened to me. I wrote a review of a collective book edited by a person that, without being a close friend is someone I share time with if we meet at conferences. I had a good opinion of this person's work and asked to review the new book. I soon saw that the book was quite a catastrophe but tried, anyway, to highlight in my review mostly the good points, trying to conceal the most glaring weaknesses. It seems this didn't work well, for the book editor of the journal in question asked me to revise the text not once but twice, which is very unusual. Things went down so quickly that I ended up withdrawing my review, the only time I have done that. I simply saw no point in antagonizing my academic friend, and I preferred not to publish a bad review. Other scholars might think this is stupid of me, and that negative reviews are something we should accept. Possibly. I just happen to prefer being constructive, much more so in a world as small as ours in which not even great books get many reviews. Authors spend a long time, sometimes years, writing academic books, as I know myself, and I just feel bad saying publicly that they have not done well. On the other hand, one must be careful never to write a review which is ridiculously enthusiastic, for that is not criticism–that is publicity.

Reviews run usually from 1000 to 2000 words (but pay attention to what each journal expects). Each of my posts here is between 1500-2000 words, and very often I write here about books I have just read. This means that writing a book review should be easy for me, but whereas I write a post in about two hours, depending on inspiration, I spent about twelve hours writing my most recent review (1895 words). Why's that? Because a book review is a formal exercise, with exact rules that I cannot break as I do in my posts. Here are some of these rules:

- you need to describe the book for prospective readers, but the review cannot simply be a synopsis
- you must be familiar with the precedents of the book in question (but remember that reviews do not usually include a bibliography of works cited) and be able to contextualize it
- you need to judge the book according to what its author claims it does (in the introduction), not according to what you would like the book to be
- you are required to comment on the structure of the book, if only briefly, and be able to pick up deficiencies, if any, but don't overdo it
- a review must engage with the ideas expressed in the book (identify a thesis, the main arguments), which means that you assume the position not only of a reader but also of a fellow writer, as if you were able to write a similar book–this is for me the hardest part, for I always try to put myself in the author's shoes and imagine what it must have taken to have written that book
- never be smug, never be patronizing and much less insulting but don't overdo praise
- be formal, you can never say 'this is a glorious volume' (much less 'this book is awful')

In terms of structure, reviews should begin by presenting the volume, as noted. Then the precedents (i.e. similar books already published) must be mentioned and compared to the new volume; perhaps also other books by the author. Next comes the paragraph(s) about the book's strong points, and then (hopefully) minor comments on what could be improved or is missing. Finally, the conclusion, ideally recommending the book for its good qualities. In my last review, I had to include information about whether the volume in question could be accessible to a wider, popular audience; this puzzled me a bit, as the instructions came from an academic journal and the book was also academic. There is a similar book with a simpler academic jargon and so I could add a comment about this matter, but I found the request a bit unusual. Only academics read academic books, and only academic read reviews of academic books. We do, don't we?

In terms of an academic CV, writing a review is not of great value, though when I passed my state examination for tenure back in 2001, the half a dozen reviews I had published were noted as a positive contribution. I don't know what the official accreditation agencies think of reviews, and I am not aware that they are ranked in the databases which index everything we publish. To be perfectly frank with you, in the last five years or so I have been reviewing books not thinking of my CV at all but because I could not afford the volumes in question. The last book I have reviewed costs 99 euros (hardback edition) and even though we are not paid for reviewing, I feel that in this case I have earned those 99 euros (and no need to pay for taxes!). So that's another good incentive to review. I assume that the publishing houses know about this, which is why in many cases reviewers are only offered the .pdf of the text. I hate reading .pdf…

To sum up, if you're a doctoral student reading this post and are in your second or third year it might be a good idea to think of publishing your first review. I don't know whether the tips I have offered here will help, and whether my position—review only the books you truly enjoy—is orthodox but this is what I do myself. And if you are a career academic with other priorities, let me remind you that even though reviewing will not do much for your CV, one can always learn plenty from paying close attention to how our colleagues write. Besides, we can hardly expect others to review our work if we do not write reviews ourselves.

17 May 2021/ VIRGINIA AND NELLIE: THE WOMAN WITH NO ROOM OF HER OWN

This past Sant Jordi I was given as a present Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Una habitación ajena* (*A Room not of One's Own*), originally issued in 1997 and now re-issued in a new, revised edition published to coincide with the 80th anniversary of Virginia Woolf's death in 1941 (she was born in 1882). Bartlett's title alludes, of course, to Woolf's long essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929), in which the author argues that women have not been free to write as well as they could because they have lacked a room of one's own (but recall how Jane Austen wrote great novels half-hidden in a corner of her family's living room). The bit that is usually neglected in quotations is that the three times Woolf mentions this coveted room she also mentions money, specifically 500 pounds a year, which apparently come from work rather than rent (or maybe not). In short, calling her view with irony 'an opinion upon one minor point', Woolf writes that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. What Bartlett adds is that a woman writer must also have servants, whether she likes it or not.

Bartlett novelizes in her book the stormy relationship between Woolf and her two servants, Lottie Hope and Nellie Boxall, above all with Nellie. She takes up in this way the implicit challenge thrown by Woolf herself. In December 1929, Woolf candidly wrote in

her diary that 'If I were reading this diary, if it were a book that came my way, I think I should seize with greed on the portrait of Nelly (sic), and make a story–perhaps make the whole story revolve around that–it would amuse me. Her character–our efforts to get rid of her–our reconciliations'. The researcher that Bartlett invents for her novel tells us that Woolf made frequent mention in a rather acerbic tone of her clashes with Nellie (whose name she always misspelled), her cook and main housekeeper between 1916 and 1934. Bartlett imagines that Nellie learned to keep a diary from observing her mistress and, so, her novel intercalates the observations of the present-day researcher with this diary, and with dramatized chapters written in the third person. Bartlett swears in her author's note that all the petty misencounters depicted in her novel did happen, as attested by Woolf's own eight-volume diary. They were all based, according to Bartlett, on Nellie's progressive realization that her masters' left-wing political beliefs did not result in generosity towards their servants, whom, in short, they exploited (she was paid only £20 a year). This is a thesis similar to what Alison Light maintains in her study *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (2007), though she cautions that the Marxist reading is in a way an anachronism, as few employers thought of servants as labour, seeing them instead as persons they kept.

Nellie started working at the Woolfs' in the middle of World War I, which is a major point of inflexion in the history of domestic service. Last year I read, as background to my teaching of Victorian Literature, Judith Flanders' *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (2004), Karen Foy's *Life in the Victorian Kitchen* (2014), and Fiona McDonald's *Victorian Servants, a Very Peculiar History* (2010). I learned from them that Victorian middle-class households were complex machineries with high maintenance needs requiring from one to twenty servants, depending on the owner's status. The Stephens, Virginia's parents (Leslie and Julia), had ten servants, which means that Woolf and her siblings grew up with all their personal needs catered for. The daily lives of Victorian servants were gruelling affairs, with constant hard-core chores from morning to evening, and no leisure except one afternoon off, a whole day if they were lucky. Pay was never high, and they always depended on the whims of masters and mistresses who could dismiss servants with no severance payment, and with no references though without these getting a new position was impossibly hard. Servants who grew sick or grew old always depended on the charity of their employers. And, of course, only upper servants in rich households (governesses, housekeepers, butlers) could expect to have a room of their own to sleep in; the rest shared cramped accommodation, usually in cold attics. Nellie, indeed, complains all the time about having to share a room with Lottie. When she finally has a room to herself, Virginia feels free to intrude whenever she pleases. A major row erupts, precisely, when an annoyed Nellie orders her mistress to leave her room. Such insolence!

No wonder, then, that as World War I progressed and the need for factory labour grew in the UK, more and more young women chose to abandon employment as servants. Besides, with prices rising throughout the 1920s and with the constant turmoil of the general strikes called by the unions, eventually the middle classes found themselves unable to employ domestic help beyond one or two persons, as was the Woolfs' case. A surprising aspect of Bartlett's novel is her description of the Woolfs' diverse homes–Monk's House and Asham House in Sussex, and Hogarth House in London's Gordon Square–as not particularly comfortable. It is hard for us to imagine middle-class persons living in homes with no hot water and no central heating, but that was common. Bartlett's Nellie complains all the time about being cold and about having to shift lots of coal constantly. The Woolfs never purchased the modern conveniences appearing in the early 20th century (vacuum cleaners, for instance, were commercialized in 1905). When, tired of their constant bickering and of her frequent threats to leave their service, Virginia curtly dismissed Nellie, she was happy to find a position with a couple

who did have all the latest gadgets: actors Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester. She remained with them until 1939, choosing not to follow them to the USA. Instead, she retired to her native village, Farncombe in Surrey, and purchased there a home of her own, where she lived with fellow servant Lottie, until her death in 1965.

I don't think that Woolf's relationship with Nellie is extraordinary. What is extraordinary is that it is documented in detail on the mistress' side and that this mistress happened to be a progressive feminist who believed in women's independence. For those of us coming from the working-classes the contradictions of middle-class feminism have always been easy to spot, like the glaring absence of domestic service from English fiction. TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-75) and *Downtown Abbey* (2010-15, plus the two films, 2019 and 2021), together with Kazuo Ishiguro's marvellous novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), have appeased our curiosity about the lives of the servants in upper-class households. Yet, there is still much to say about the middle-class' uncomfortable relationship with its servants in the vein of what Bartlett does. Neither Virginia nor her sister Vanessa knew how to cook. Both, Alison Light writes, 'were irked by keeping servants but resigned to it'. Their resignation has to do with the loss of privacy that became in the early 20th century an integral part of personal life. For the generation of their parents using domestic service was not an issue, but for Woolf's generation that bond became awkward, an unwanted intrusion in lives that felt exposed because they did not abide by standard social rules. Women like Virginia and Vanessa felt dependent and hated the burden of that feeling. In fact, Virginia would eventually learn to cook to be her own mistress and eat as she pleased. This crucial transition in the lives of middle-class women, from dependent to independent mistress of the house, has not been sufficiently narrated, though. There must be millions of Nellies (and of Virginias) waiting for their tale to be told.

Obviously, middle-class working women have never become independent because we still need domestic help. The servants are gone and, unlike what was promised, domestic appliances have not done away with housework, no matter how much they have simplified it. I just shudder at the thought of doing the washing by hand! We may have the room and the money, but not the domestic freedom that, as I see it, will only come with robotic servants. In the meantime, most of us manage with hourly-paid help (babysitters, cleaners) carried out by working women who manage their working-class homes quite often with the help of a grandmother. I'm sure you must be thinking that if only the men helped more, our domestic troubles would be over. I believe, however, that this is not just a question of getting men more involved in domestic chores but of working fewer hours. 1970s feminism promised a utopia in which individuals would work part-time and there would be plenty of time to share housework, including raising children. As we are now, most middle-class couples in which both members work do need help, as Virginia and Leonard Woolf did a hundred years ago. We might not need live-in help, nor for the same exact chores, but we are still dependent on others. Unless, that is, we choose to keep our homes below the impossible spotless standards of full-time housewives (like my mother). I'm not, then, writing this post to criticize the Woolfs' at all, but to stress that this middle-class dependence is still hidden in life and in fiction, as much as it was hidden in Austen's time or in Woolf's time. It may be swept away by the Roomba rather than under the rug, but it is still hidden.

Read today, in 2021, *Una habitación ajena* may elicit a negative response about the privileged members of the Bloomsbury group and the social hypocrisy of the bohemian (English) middle-class, with its abstract left-wing politics and its inability to be truly interested in the persons they employed in their homes. I would be, however, careful about how we approach the portrait of the Woolfs. Looking at the book cover illustration, which shows Woolf sitting comfortably in an armchair as Nellie stands behind in her maid's uniform, I cannot help wondering whether Bartlett does all the housework in her

home. I don't think J.K. Rowling does. Or less wealthy writers. The vision of a society in which every woman (and man) has a room to be creative in, sufficient money, and no need for domestic help is right now a utopia, for either we combine being creative with doing all our housework, or we employ someone else and enter the relations of dependence that Woolf bemoaned. I'm sure many middle-class persons have excellent relations with their paid help which are mutually satisfactory, but I don't quite see how the working-class women employed by middle-class women in their homes can enjoy the same freedom of artistic and intellectual creation. Perhaps their daughters will, but then they will need somebody else's domestic help, too.

Thus, until the day when the Nellies of this world are housekeeping robots with no need for a room of their own.

31 May 2021/ WOMEN, ROCK, AND THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST: CELEBRATING VICTORIA DE ANGELIS

I have started working on the preparation of the Cultural Studies course that I am teaching next semester, and I am thinking these days about women in pop and rock (again, after a long time). About ten days ago the Eurovision song contest took place in Rotterdam, and like half the planet I was fascinated by the Italian winners, rock band Måneskin. However, my fascination was caused not only by their obvious talent and the appeal of frontman Damiano David, but also by the contrast between bass player Victoria de Angelis and the other women in the contest. That contrast is today my focus, together with the thoughts prompted by my reading of Kristin J. Lieb's *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (2018, second edition).

I must thank my wonderful student Andrea Delgado López for having rekindled my interest in music, which I lost to a combination of things, one of them being my sudden inability to work with the music on when I hit 40 or thereabouts. Andrea has just finished an excellent BA dissertation on Childish Gambino's music video "This is America", and has allowed me to embark her on the project of producing an e-book entirely of her authorship with an analysis of 25 outstanding music videos (available in July). Her list for that project was the reason why I spent a happy day watching 50 music videos as I chronicled here a while ago. Andrea's perceptive analyses of the videos made me see I need to get back on track and, as they say, there is nothing better than teaching a course to learn, so that's what I intend to do with the help of my students. The idea is to consider in particular the current position of women in Anglophone pop, and produce an e-book though at this point I'm not sure whether I want it to be critical of what is wrong with women's presence in that music genre or to seek positive examples. Perhaps both, depending, too, on what students prefer.

So, back to Eurovision. My husband and I are confirmed, though not fanatical Eurofans (we have seen *The Story of Fire Saga* twice, if that's an indication of our commitment), and we watched the two semi-finals from beginning to end, feeling as usual disappointed with the elimination of particular favourites (Australia, really?). As we watched, we noticed what we're calling the legacy of the 'Eleni school', after Eleni Foureira, the Cyprus representative in 2018 who did not win but became an instant hit with her song "Fuego". Eleni's act consisted of passing as a song of supposed female empowerment—with the memorable lines 'Oh your love is like wild-wildfire/You got me pelican fly-fly-flyin'"—a song (written by men) about a woman's sexual availability, a point underscored by her sexy dance routine and revealing outfit. This year many Elenis made

it to the final: Elene Tsagrinou, also from Cyprus; Anxhela Peristeri from Albania; Hurricane from Serbia; Stefania from Greece, Natalia Gordienko from Moldova and Efendi from Azerbaijan; perhaps I should add Eden Alene from Israel. That's seven entries in total and nine sexy ladies (Hurricane are three women) out of twenty-six countries, with no sexy men in sight except for Damiano. The other women who could be seen on stage also followed the sexy script (celebrating curviness, like Senhit from San Marino or Destiny from Malta, or chic, like Barbara Pravi from France), or ignored it (though I loved the dark blue dress of the Hoverphonic singer from Belgium). My point, though, is that only Victoria de Angelis was there playing an instrument and not just, basically, exhibiting herself. Apart, now that I recall from Daði og Gagnamagnið keyboard player Árný (though she was not really playing, I think).

So while everyone has gone bananas dissecting Damiano's presence, his possible consumption of drugs during the show (sternly denied!), and how his upper-middle-class origins make him an 'inauthentic' rock idol, I was wondering about Victoria. I don't use social networks so I have no idea how she presents herself there, and seeing how pretty this very young girl is, I assume there must be tons of comments about her looks, maybe photos she has posted herself. What interested me is that, as I read in an Italian *Elle* interview, her own idol is Sonic Youth's bassist, guitarist and vocalist [Kim Gordon](). I've never been a Sonic Youth fan but I appreciate Gordon's enormous contribution, and I'm certainly looking forward to reading her memoir, *Girl in a Band* (2015). The De Angelis-Gordon connection is simply thrilling and I do hope that more women follow it to bring back the figure of the female rock musician, which seems to me to be a bit lost in these times of Elenis and of WAP rappers. Perhaps rock in general is a bit lost, and Måneskin won the contest out of a certain nostalgia, which could also explain Finland's nice sixth position with Blind Channel's Linkin-Park style song "Dark Side".

As a woman in a rock band and a bass player, then, De Angelis is, so to speak, necessary because we have been engulfed by an absurd pop-music model that is too fixated on the sexy singer. I do not discard that De Angelis will also exploit herself or be herself exploited in that way, but my point is that she is not in Måneskin for her looks but, basically, because this is the band she put together (there are rumours she is the real leader). The proliferation of the Elenis is, on the other hand, an export to other geographical areas of a pernicious American model that is not only exploitative but also cruel with the women who do not fit the mould. Malta's Destiny or Israel's Netta Barzilai (the 2018 winner) cannot be said to have really broken away from that model, nor has American Lizzo, because they still insist on associating sexiness with the female pop singer (or rapper), a quality male performers needn't worry about. If Damiano David wants to look sexy, that's his choice, not an obligation.

Kristin J. Lieb used to be a journalist and a marketing and business development executive and she has an insiders' view of how the pop industry works. Denying all forms of feminist empowerment through the self-sexualization of women, she is very clear in her book that the artist who remains fully clothed in music videos has the power, and the one who is seen half naked does not. As she notes, male pop stars belong in the former category, women in the latter. She also mentions how in promotional material the face is emphasized in the men's case and the whole body in the women's. And, the rawest thing for me, that the career of female acts is planned taking into account their ageing process—that is to say, if you're wondering why suddenly a certain female artist is all over the place, this might be because her recording company thinks she will not age well and they want to recap their investment as quickly as possible. Before she is no longer fuckable, excuse my French. As for those who lack the looks (according, of course, to a very narrow view of what the 'looks' are) but have real musical talent, the industry still offers them a place—as composers of hit songs for the main acts. The idea that female pop artists are brands is not really new but what I had totally missed is that in the end the

music is just a small part of a multifaceted brand promotion which touches on many other products. If you want to know about a first-rank brand and the rest, Leib explains, think of who you'd see promoting a line of clothing or a perfume.

Lieb is, I think, very much reductive for even though there is much in common in the presentation of the artists she considers (Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Katy Perry, Fergie) each has a tale to tell. Beyoncé, it is obvious, controls the game in ways which totally escape poor Spears (legally her father's ward). She is also quite ambiguous about the role played by Madonna, for Lieb praises her for building a model of self-empowerment—being very harsh on Camille Paglia's critique of the self-sexualization embedded in it—while at the same time reading almost with sarcasm Fergie's sexy music videos, which are Madonna's legacy as well. Lieb also tends to dismiss stars that still have much appeal among their followers and that are much loved outside the USA (like Kylie Minogue) and is not too respectful of the ones that fight hard to come back on her own terms (Fiona Apple). And she positively hates Katy Perry for being a serial cultural appropriator (Lieb loves Miley Cyrus). An added problem is that cultural studies age very quickly. Lieb's book was issued in a second edition in 2018, but Billie Eilish and Dua Lipa are nowhere to be seen in it.

I do agree with Lieb that self-sexualization is not self-empowerment since you are still pandering to the male gaze but, after coming across De Angelis, my doubt is whether by exposing how the industry works we teach our students to resist the appeal of the current pop stars. Billie Eilish's new bombshell look and lingerie photoshoot for British *Vogue* have a far more direct impact on young girls than any crusty discussion by feminist academics of whether she is right to exhibit herself like that (thinking of her fans). I did want to begin my course with the Eilish cover and ask my students how they feel about her sudden abandonment of her signature baggy clothes, but perhaps that will be too prim and counterproductive. Perhaps I should begin instead with a photo of Victoria de Angelis in all her bass-playing glory as an example of other careers women can have in music. And talk about Kim Gordon, still very much active though older, at 66, than Madonna (62), and not botoxed like her. It's funny how Lieb speaks of the pop star's obligation to be sexy and young but does not comment on how Madonna's and J. Lo's artificial youth conditions older women's view of themselves even when they do not even care for these singers. The sight of la Lopez, 51, pole-dancing during the 2020 Superbowl gave me the creeps. Imagine Luis Miguel, also 51, doing that…

Leib blames all this madness on the rise of MTV, when, as the Buggles sang 'video killed the radio star'. She also highlights digital piracy, the rise of the social media and of the streaming platforms, which require stars to be ubiquitous brands in order to make the money lost when sales of CDs collapsed. The market, of course, is the same for men, but they still get to age naturally and keep their clothes on in all music genres, which shows that gender is shaping music branding indeed. I see, however, no way out of this since the girls who ultimately buy the music and the products endorsed by the female stars (not really the boys, right?) have also opted for an intensive self-sexualization as the young boys look less and less attractive. I hope my students give me some clues about how to break out of this vicious circle.

Enjoy Måneskin, thank you Victoria!

8 June 2021/ THE FEMINISATION OF LITERARY FICTION: IS IT HAPPENING?

I am reacting here to an article by Johanna Thomas-Corr, published on 16 May in *The Guardian*: "How Women Conquered the World of Fiction". The arguments, as you will see, are not 100% new, but they are worth considering (again). The subtitle, by the way, reads "From Sally Rooney to Raven Leilani, female novelists have captured the literary zeitgeist, with more buzz, prizes and bestsellers than men. But is this cultural shift something to celebrate or rectify?" The keywords 'buzz, prizes and bestsellers' reveal that Thomas-Corr is not quite interested in quality but in the public visibility of new authors and novels. The concept 'literary zeitgeist', it must be noted, does not refer to genre fiction but exclusively to literary fiction, which is the focus of the article. Incidentally, Thomas-Corr does mention at the end of the piece a longish list of exciting, new male writers. Call me dirty-minded but I very much suspect that her ultimate aim is promoting them (or echoing their promotion by their respective publishing houses).

The main question that Thomas-Corr examines is whether "Men–and especially young men–are being shut out of an industry that is blind to its own prejudices", meaning that said publishing industry is not treating male writers with the same care it is investing in female writers. The secondary question she examines is whether, in fact, fewer young male writers are currently writing literary fiction. Flippantly, the journalist writes that "Whenever I speak to men in their 20s, 30s and 40s, most tell me they couldn't give a toss about fiction, especially literary fiction. They have video games, YouTube, nonfiction, podcasts, magazines, Netflix". I myself am a big fan of non-fiction and fail to see why this genre—in my view far superior in interest to today's literary fiction—is dismissed like that; besides, my impression is that nonfiction is a very egalitarian genre, with a paritary representation of men and women authors (and readers). I do not dispute that young men read less literary fiction than in the past, and less of everything else than in the past, but I do dispute that what they read is not worth considering as quality writing— particularly in view of how genres that interest women, such as romance, are treated.

But, back to the journalist's argumentation: young men read less literary fiction, which also means they write fewer books in that genre, and, anyway, when they do write them, their novels are not received with the same eagerness as the novels by young women. The reasons for this, the article claims, are that there is an increasing number of women in key positions in the publishing world, as editors and agents, and that women readers seemingly prefer women authors, which is creating a snowball effect. The more you connect women with literary fiction at all levels, the less men are present in it at all levels. This, of course, is disputed by the many male readers commenting on Thomas-Corr's article and I am certainly convinced that the number of male readers who avoid women's writing for misogynistic reasons, or basic lack of interest, has been diminishing constantly. In fact, the issue that Thomas-Corr raises is not problematic in genres such as detective fiction, which is written (and devoured) by absolutely everybody. I do have myself some misgivings that, as Thomas-Carr suggests, men are also giving up in fantasy and science fiction, but I don't mean that they are writing less—I mean that they are giving up on getting the buzz, the media coverage, the awards, seeing that now all that attention is going to women, partly for the novelty of what they are doing, and also because women's writing is today, in all fronts, far more self-confident than men's.

The reasons for that lack of self-confidence are not a great mystery. The 'big beasts', as Thomas-Corr calls them of the 80s and 90s—"Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, William Boyd, Kazuo Ishiguro et al in the UK and Philip Roth, John Updike and Saul Bellow in the US"—are writers whose candid explorations of the less wholesome aspects of the male soul and body are far less welcome today. I was a young woman who read many books by Roth with great admiration, and an older woman who until recently

believed he had been robbed of the Nobel Prize, but I have changed my mind. I am not dismissing at all these writers' collective effort to rescue the Anglophone novel from the depressive 1970s, but theirs are stories I am no longer interested in. Besides, I have many new women novelists to choose from, and I think this is a process that many women my age have gone through. Having said that, I remain an enthusiastic reader of men's fiction, but of the kind that energizes me (what I find in science fiction), not of the kind that depresses me. I have just abandoned recent Booker prize winner by Scottish author Douglas Stuart, *Shuggie Bain*, requiring no reminder of how dreary the life of an alcoholic woman and her loving son can be. As for Sally Rooney, whom Thomas-Corr mentions again and again as a female writer gloriously capable of generating an enormous buzz, I have already expressed here my extremely negative opinion of her awfully depressing, mediocre *Normal People*. She simply is not the best woman writer around.

Thomas-Corr reports the words of a male agent, claiming that a major problem in the publishing industry allegedly dominated by women is "the lack of interest in male novelists and the widespread idea that the male voice is problematic", which diminishes the impulse to invest on them. In view of the many difficulties to publish in comparison to their female peers, Thomas-Carr notes, "young male writers have given up on literary fiction" finding "narrative nonfiction (particularly travelogues and nature writing in the vein of Robert Macfarlane) or genre fiction (especially crime and sci-fi)" more accessible avenues toward professionalization. I will not comment again on the disparagement of these genres in comparison to overpraised literary fiction, but I remain baffled by the journalist's comment that these other genres are "less mediated by the culture and the conversations on Twitter" because it subtly hints that women dominate social media and are using them to police and cancel men's fiction they dislike. Is this the awful truth??

A (male) reader signing as denisou comments that "People do not need to turn to the newest literary fiction to understand the experience of being a straight man in the world today", and, anyway, this kind of novel has been offered for decades now. It appears, Thomas-Corr notes, that the only male writer with something new to contribute is the black, gay man, but, obviously, it is absurd to leave outside any kind of promotion and celebration the work of all straight men. "Male writers of colour", Thomas-Corr writes, "feel they are under-represented" in the lists of thrilling novelties, by which she means straight BAME and Black men. There is, besides, a suspicion that white, straight, working-class men are wrongly put in the same category as their middle-class predecessors. Northern Irish working-class writer Darran Anderson declares, Thomas-Corr reports, that "I have neither the desire nor the means to pick up Martin Amis's or John Updike's bill". Nor should he or any other men writing today.

The issue that may be making all the difference is, in fact, half-hidden in the article. Literary fiction by men became increasingly sexualized from the 1960s onwards, leaving aside the pioneering efforts of D.H. Lawrence in the 1920s. The way many male writers of distinction have been portraying sex is, simply, no longer palatable to women readers. Writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, who is not known for including much sex in his novels (I can't recall a single scene by him), are thus better candidates to lasting fame than Amis, the above mentioned Roth, or others. Generally speaking, misogyny is no longer welcome—though this does not men that women's writing is wholly free from this taint— and it is particularly unwelcome in sex scenes. What is happening now is that whereas women writers have found a way to write about sex that satisfies (!) women readers, male writers have not. This is why, Thomas-Corr observes, "Male writers definitely seem to be feeling more reticent about sex" and no wonder about it. Excuse my boutade, but what is a literary novel by a man with no sex scenes except a failure of nerve (leaving Ishiguro aside)? The recipe, then, for men to make it back to the literary spotlight is to learn from women new lessons about how to do sex scenes. I don't mean they have to copy women,

but refresh their own style and offer so much sexiness that women readers will go crazy for them. For, as we know, literary fiction has always been about desire.

I don't think, to sum up, that men are excluded from literary fiction or excluding themselves for lack of interest or of opportunities. I just think that they need to rethink their own representation, and makes it more engaging. I am very much aware that capturing at the same time the attention of the non-reading gamer and of the female serial reader of quality fiction is an almost impossible task, but some nonfiction and genre fiction male authors have managed to do that. As for the portrayal of intimacy that literary fiction relies on, I do see that women handle it now much better and with greater confidence because they see themselves addressing like-minded female readers, and caring far less for the opinion of male readers. Aspiring male literary writers need to ask themselves, therefore, how to meet the challenge of reattracting a larger male and female audience, not by following a woke scenario (please!!!!) but by reinventing the representation of masculinity for our times, including a non-misogynistic sexuality.

And if any woman reading this is the type who proudly declares 'I don't read men', then, I'm sorry for you because too many men were (or are) of the 'I don't read women' persuasion. Let's not fall into the sexist trap as readers, writers, editors, agents or teachers and let's keep the conversation open.

21 June 2021/ IS SCIENCE FICTION RESPONSIBLE FOR IMAGINING THE FUTURE? POSSIBLY…

I've been attending these days in fits and starts the Science Fiction Research Association's international conference, conditioned by the six-hour difference with Toronto, where the hosting institution (Seneca College) is located. Fifteen months into the pandemic I needn't say how impossible it is to listen to anybody speak on Zoom, or similar, without either multitasking or disconnecting after five minutes. I may doodle like I'm possessed when I listen to papers delivered in person, but it is just beyond me to get used to streaming. I pity our poor students! And, no, unlike what you might expect, science-fiction conferences do not happen in an advanced virtual reality environment where we can project our ultra-realistic yet fantastic avatars, as if this were *Ready Player One*'s immersive universe OASIS. At most, you get funny backgrounds. A keynote speaker had chosen, for mysterious reasons, a gorgeous photo of a process of in vitro fecundation. Another was floating in outer space.

The main theme of the conference has been 'The Future as/of Inequality', so you can be sure that there has been much talk of class (in my case of middle-class men's fears of not doing well as family men). Even so, I would say that the main keywords, or buzzwords, in the sessions I have attended were 'race' and 'dystopia'. I wish the papers had dealt with how utopia will be reached in a post-racial future civilization, but most dealt with the extension into a long-lasting dystopia of the same racial issues negatively affecting so many people today. The number of authors and main characters other than white has grown spectacularly in recent science fiction, but many (or even most) are battling conflicts so deeply rooted in current racism that no utopian horizon is emerging for anyone of any skin colour.

The most interesting panel I attended had contributions by two of the most admirable scholars in science fiction (yes, I said admirable because I admire them): Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint. This came after the keynote lecture by Lars Schmeink in which he described the connections between the current theorization of capitalism–such as surveillance capitalism, the concept popularized by Shoshana Zuboff in her eponymous

book, and others, such as Susan Lettow's biocapitalism–and current science fiction. I had a feeling of *déjà vu*, having heard plenty in the 1980s about how corporations might replace nations in the 21ˢᵗ century as *de jure* and *de facto* global organizations. William Gibson ranted all he wanted in his cyberpunk novels about the boundless power of *zaibatsus*, when it seemed that Japan would soon dominate the world (whatever happened to Japan?). And if I recall correctly, in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) the characters' citizenship was granted by the corporations they worked for (as if I were an Autonomous University citizen rather than a citizen of the Spanish kingdom). But back to Bould and Vint: they discussed whether science fiction should and could operate beyond capitalism both in its means of production and the content of the stories. Their views were similar yet quite different. You'll see.

There is something definitely hypocritical, I think, in telling tales of corporate dystopia while being published or broadcast by immense corporations. As Mark Bould insisted, science fiction should be free of commodification in order to be a true contributor to a future which could imagine life beyond corporate dystopia. Schmeink quoted Ursula Le Guin's famous saying "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words". This optimistic view appears to agree with Bould's faith in science fiction but, of course, Le Guin does not explain how 'the art of words' can undermine the corporate monster from inside. We know that capitalism, in fact, can turn anything into a commodity, including resistance (the first example that has come to my mind is the fortune someone must have made selling t-shirts with the photo of Che Guevara).

Bould suggested something along the lines of perhaps turning science fiction into a kind of "collective folk art" as, to name an instance, ballads once were. Bould, who co-edited with British author China Miéville the volume *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (2009), is surely aware of Miéville's alternative proposal that authors are paid a salary by the state, which has always raised many eyebrows but seems fairer than having another job as you produce fiction in hippie-folkish (or Elizabethan aristo) style. Being myself an author paid by the Spanish state to write (also to teach, of course), I see Miéville's point–though I wonder how authors would be selected, and if writing science fiction would be considered a merit. Anyway, Bould complained that "science fiction is everywhere but not evenly distributed" and called for an end to its commodification. My view, however, is that this goal is as difficult as making academic work truly open access, and not yet another corporate product (or what did you think it is?).

Sherryl Vint's argumentation was more anti-corporation in the sense that she not only questioned how corporations force everything, including sf, to be commodified, but also how the nightmarish world that corporations have created has colonized sf's imagination of the future and also our present. Her main target were the white, male, US billionaires whose visions of an ultra-monetized future we are all following like sheep to the slaughter, and how they are presenting those visions not as the opposite of the future science fiction has imagined but as its realization. To give you an example, Elon Musk is selling Neuralink–a project to connect human brains to computers–as the realization of Iain M. Banks's neural laces in the Culture novels, calling himself a fan. Conveniently, though, Musk forgets that the Culture is a post-capitalist, post-scarcity civilization where guys like him would be socially ostracized. So, yes, I'm with Sherryl Vint in this urgent need to vehemently deny that the future to which Musk and company are dragging us is a utopian science-fictional future, and the only possible one. We must "resist the occupation of sf by all these corporations and alt-right groups", she said, and reject all the "bad forms of using sf". These are, I believe, dominant in the stylish but trashy sf served by the streaming platforms, cinema and videogames (less so in print fiction),

overwhelmingly at the service of convincing earthlings that despite the unstoppable onslaught of climate change and other man-made disasters they must buy the latest i-phone and change their gas-powered car for a Tesla.

I have already expressed here several times that as academics we can contribute to altering the path of science fiction by writing about the works that promote positive change, and eschew the dystopian texts. I am, however, in a minority of one (or of very few), and run besides the risk of having nothing to write about if the sf I am reading and seeing these days continues in this dystopian vein. As plain consumers and as academics we can make demands on writers, showrunners, filmmakers and videogame designers to move beyond the 'strong-hero-battles-corporation' scenario, as we are managing to get better gender and racial inclusiveness. I'm sure that corporations are to blame a great deal for their insistence on destroying the planet as they sell us parasitical, useless objects and services but each of us contributes their share. Including myself. For instance, have spent this morning twenty euros to buy from Amazon Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry of the Future*, hypocritically ignoring that this contributes more to enriching Jeff Bezos than to furthering Robinson's crusade for utopia (I don't think, however, that Robinson would appreciate the idea of sf as a folk product).

I am working on something completely unrelated to sf, connected with recent American politics, and listening yesterday to Senator Cory Booker speak to Jimmy Kimmel, I realized what we're missing and this man has in great quantities: positivity. Someone commented on YouTube that listening to Booker and to Donald Trump made you wonder how they could belong to the same species. Well, Trump is a main generator of dystopia whereas Booker has made a point of turning his personal sunniness into positive politics aimed at increasing US citizens' welfare. I am not saying that Booker should write science fiction (or perhaps he should!): what I am saying is that science fiction has lost all its optimism and that generally speaking optimism is defended by very few (like Booker). Because of this science fiction is now an almost useless tool to fashion not only utopia but even a workable plan for the next decade. Hearing my twelve-year-old niece say recently that she does not want to have children because she herself has a very difficult future ahead breaks my heart. I wish I could tell her 'don't be silly, your future will be great!' (I would never tell anyone 'do have children', that's their choice!) but I just cannot illustrate this promise with any text, science fictional or otherwise. We seem to have lost in the attack against the false universalism of traditional sf the ability to build new worlds without inequality.

I'll finish with a remark someone made in the conference: the problem is that we, middle-aged white baby boomers, do not want to give up our privileges and share our wealth with other generations and other nations. This is not a new discourse, but I was dismayed to hear it in a science-fiction conference because it is divisive and because Earth has resources to make everyone's lives better, if only we get rid of the billionaires. I don't mean killing them and using them for compost, as someone's bad joke went, but putting a cap to personal earnings. One of the biggest lies of capitalism is that without the incentive of making money individuals do not exert their best talents–the defunct Soviet Union is often quoted as an example of how lack of personal gain-based initiative undermines nations. Yet, as long as the world is run by a cadre of billionaires (American or Chinese, I don't care) and their corporations the future will be dominated by inequality. As for Le Guin's words, someone did imagine what the future would be like without the absolute right of kings, but the problem is that we cannot imagine, having horrendously failed with communism, what will replace capitalism. She suggested smaller, rural communities with limited technology based on mutual aid, but I don't quite see that. I see full automation generating income that guarantees universal freedom from the worst kind of jobs–but that for many is dystopia.

Let's ask science-fiction writers to come up with new ideas, and help them to rethink the future. It is our duty, as much as theirs.

This is the ten-minute talk I gave last week at the international conference of the Science Fiction Research Association, of which I spoke in my last post. Since we had been given such a short time, I used no secondary sources and focused directly on the two novels I discuss. I was a bit nervous that the paper would seem too informal but nobody complained. So, here it is, with a warning about spoilers.

The exploration of gender in science fiction mostly focuses on women and the LGTBI collective, overlooking heterosexual masculinity, even though most authors have that identity. I consider here what men's recent science fiction says about this type of masculinity from a critical position informed by Masculinities Studies, though I'll leave my theoretical framework aside because of time constraints. My focus are two novels set in the present: *The Humans* (of 2013) by English author Matthew Haig, and *Dark Matter* (of 2016) by American novelist Blake Crouch. Haig's novel is a satire and Crouch's a thriller but, despite their differences, both address a key issue for contemporary masculinity, namely, how to successfully combine the demands of an ambitious career with a pro-feminist family life.

These novels could be Gothic horror about the wife and teen son who gradually realize their husband and father is a stranger. Yet, both are first person narrations that use science fiction (in a light vein) to portray a male individual who needs to understand how men function in the contemporary world. In Haig's novel, a nameless alien learns to be a caring human man by rejecting the behaviour of the uncaring workaholic it replaces. The family man in Crouch's novel must defend his well-balanced masculinity from the assault by another uncaring workaholic, his own doppelgänger. Alien and family man have little in common but the authors' message is similar. Both use science fiction to endorse a positive masculine model, focused on caring for women and children. Neither author explains, though, why a happy family life should involve sacrificing personal careers. In each case, the birth of a son transforms the lives of at least one parent into a less publicly rewarding existence. Arguably, both novels resist above all the impact of parenting on personal life.

In each novel, there is a talented woman who has chosen motherhood over her career but the situation of the husband, both gifted scientists, is different. In *The Humans* top Cambridge mathematician Andrew Martin is a selfish career man, and a disappointing husband and father, who cheats on his wife Isobel and lacks any empathy for his literally suicidal teen son Gulliver. In *Dark Matter*, Chicago physicist Jason Dessen is a happy family man, in love with his wife Daniela and in syntony with their son Charlie, unconcerned by having ditched his promising career. Each from their angle, Haig and Crouch are very critical of the workaholic career model that makes family life dysfunctional (or impossible) and that relegates women to a supporting role. In *The Humans*, workaholic Martin is killed when the alien narrator snatches his body. In *Dark Matter* Jason2, the doppelgänger, is dispatched for stealing Jason's family life. In his gentle satire, Haig hints that an alien could be a better English family man than a human male, whereas Crouch has his happy American family man kill in a vicious way the workaholic he might have been.

Neither Haig nor Crouch, however, imagine their scientific male geniuses, for this is what Martin and Dessen are, combining their professions with a rich family life. For both, the arrival of a child at an early stage in their careers is a major crisis which forces them and their partners to make crucial choices. Andrew's wife Isobel abandons her career as a historian to be a mother and to support her husband's career, later taking up teaching. The unexpected pregnancy of Jason's girlfriend Daniela makes them abandon their dream careers –hers as an artist, his in quantum physics–to become teachers, too. When each novel begins, the two couples are in their early forties and have been in their relationships for long: 20 years in Andrew and Isobel's case, 15 in Jason and Daniela's case. The novels narrate, then, a sort of mid-life crisis.

To give some more detail, Haig's novel narrates the efforts of a Vonnadorian sent to Earth to stop Professor Martin from announcing his resolution of the Riemann Hypothesis, as this would fast-forward human progress in ways the aliens mistrust. Martin's identity is wiped out and his body occupied by the nameless alien, who cannot easily adapt to his new life. The professor's new oddball behaviour is, of course, attributed to a breakdown caused by overworking. On its side, the body-snatcher resists its orders to kill all who might know of Martin's mathematical breakthrough. The alien refuses to kill Isobel and Gulliver, though he does murder the rival to whom a boastful Martin communicates his discovery. Taking a look at the many certificates of distinction in this man's office, the alien feels "thankful to come from a place where personal success was meaningless" (89).

As the alien starts valuing Isobel and Gulliver, it discovers that Martin was totally focused on his career, that his wife was unhappy but unable to divorce him, and that Gulliver cannot cope with being the son of a genius. Enjoying the pleasures of caring for the boy and of being cared for by Isobel (since in its genderless home planet, family and love do not exist), the alien decided to become fully human. The attack of a second murderous alien, however, forces the alien to disclose its real identity. Gulliver takes the revelation well, even with relief. As the alien writes, there was no sentimental scene but the boy "seemed to accept me as an extraterrestrial life form far more easily than he had accepted me as a father" (264). Isobel, though, is shattered by the loss of her new happy family life. After this episode, Haig sends the alien abroad, still posing as Martin. But, being comedy, *The Humans* ends happily. When Gulliver invites his fake Dad back home, claiming that Isobel misses their life, the alien asks whether she misses the original or the alien Martin. "You," Gulliver replies. "You're the one who looked after us" (289). No more is needed.

In *Dark Matter*, Jason2 comes from the universe where Jason rejected fatherhood, and Daniela aborted. He built there the box that gives access to the multiverse. Successful but lonely, Jason2 starts seeking the life that Jason and Daniela enjoy with Charlie. As Jason comments, "If I represent the pinnacle of family success for all the Jason Dessens, Jason2 represents the professional and creative apex. We're opposite poles of the same man, and I suppose it isn't a coincidence that Jason2 sought out my life from the infinite possibilities available" (265). Jason2 kidnaps Jason and, wrongly assuming he will be thrilled to take his place as a single career man, swaps lives with him. In fact, Jason is shattered and only uses the box to get back home and terminate his usurper. Daniela and Charlie take Jason's eventual revelation that they have been living (for a month) with Jason2 just with mild puzzlement. Yet, despite the reassurances of wife and son that Jason2 was not better than him, a certain doubt lingers. Since Jason's family never really distrusts this other man (Daniela is, in fact, thrilled with their renewed passion), it appears that Jason *is* replaceable. Jason is robbed of his life but Jason2 is, on the whole, a good enough replacement, as if Jason's roles as husband and father were just performances and not an expression of a deeply-felt identity.

To sum up, Haig and Crouch use science fiction to reject the workaholic male genius who refuses to be a good family man. Martin is flippantly replaced by an alien who is better at performing human masculinity than he ever was. As for Jason, by killing Jason2 he eliminates his workaholic self and regains his lost happy family life. Crouch, though, cannot wholly erase the impression that this man is replaceable because he can never prove that Jason is unique. Ultimately, whether a man is selfish or caring, his choices may make him vulnerable. In Haig's and Crouch's novels, the 'other being' embodies the choices not taken and men's struggle to combine professional ambition and rewarding family life. It is, therefore, important to highlight science fiction's contribution to the discussion of these male anxieties. I hope you agree!

5 JULY 2021/ THE END OF ENGLISH LITERATURE DEGREES?: NO, BUT GET READY FOR CHANGES

This post is inspired by two articles, one in *The Guardian* and one in *The Critic*, which discuss the possible end of the degrees in English language and Literature in England if things continue downhill, as they seem to be going. Before I start discussing in more detail the situation and the arguments, allow me to quote a teacher I had in my second year at university (the sophomore year, as the Americans say). Raquel Sotelo asked us, poor innocent babes, 'so, what's the use of the degree you have chosen?' We expected a long speech about the wonders of reading for a degree in 'filología' (the Spanish concept that encompasses language and Literature) but instead she bluntly said that the degree was 'no use'. It was, she added, basically a time for personal education. This is a very valid answer to me. The problem, as you will see, is that education –whether personal or collective– has no room in capitalism and this is the key question. Capitalism has room for the likes of Leo Messi and Kim Kardashian, but not for English graduates and teachers. On the other hand, as long as they make a fortune for their (for me) totally superfluous activities, I feel entitled to being paid comparatively just peanuts for my own superfluous activities. At least mine are educational.

"*The Guardian* View on English Language and Literature: More, Please" is an editorial piece subtitled "We must take care not to devalue a subject that helps us build a more rounded and healthier body politic". The text reacts to the announcement by the admissions service UCAS that "a third fewer 18-year-olds have applied to study [English] at university this year than in 2012". As a result, English academics are being fired, whereas one university –Cumbria– has altogether dismantled its English Department. *The Guardian* blames the Tory Government for this state of affairs, highlighting Education Secretary Gavin Williamson's description of Humanities degrees as "dead-end courses". The editorial also stresses the erosion of English at primary and secondary school levels, with a loss of emphasis on reading and the removal of popular Literature courses. "A rise in rote learning has been noted, along with a decline in interest in pupils' own responses to great literature", the editors write. There is a clear correlation between the lower number of university applications and the "slump in the number taking English A-levels". Add to this the cost of university fees and the Government's relentless "championing of science degrees" and the picture is complete. The conclusion is that the study of Literature in higher education, which has never been utilitarian in spirit but rather lofty in its aims, is collapsing. Whereas in Victorian times it was justified on the grounds of national unity, moral integrity and intellectual commitment, now it is justified as a means to acquire "the skills of critical analysis, lateral thinking and flexibility" that increase empathy and further the capacity for criticism. Besides, *The Guardian* concludes,

"literature provides deep, complex, lifelong pleasure, which too often gets forgotten as a worthy end in itself".

The point of view of Alexander Larman in *The Critic* is quite different. His article "The Death of the English Literature Degree" is subtitled "Thanks to 'critical theory', the study of English literature has become overrun with boring academics who hardly inspire the next generation". Larman devotes part of his article to bemoaning the loss of Medieval Literature in Leicester University's curriculum and the University of Cumbria's scrapping of the English Department as "especially egregious". For Larman, as for *The Guardian*, it is clear that "Our brave new government has little time for book-based degrees". He blames the low popularity of English degrees, too, on the burden that student loans place on the job expectations of new graduates. Gavin Williamson's inelegant remark about "dead-end courses" was apparently accompanied by the phrase "which give [students] nothing but a mountain of debt".

Surprisingly, though, Larman does not continue with an examination of the steep rise in university fees that has made student loans so appallingly onerous, but with a frontal attack on critical theory. Apparently he was a victim of its introduction in British universities, though he mentions the 1960s as the onset of the new trends, I assume that a couple of decades before he was an undergraduate. "Long before any ideas of 'woke' had entered the mainstream," Larman notes, "university English departments had decided what was, and wasn't, acceptable. Woe betide you, student or tutor alike, if you deviated from the new orthodoxy". More to the point than this boutade, Larman observes that "Students are angry, politicised and very much aware of their new status as consumers, rather than young men and women who are attending universities to learn". Their anger fuels the culture wars waged on campuses all over the Anglophone world, with Literature acting as a mere weapon in the midst of a flurry of "doctrinal absurdities". Almost logically, Larman concludes that if English degrees are "on the way out (…) I cannot say that I am particularly sad about their demise". English Literature needs to be "treated seriously once more, and given the credibility that it deserves" to prevent "this slow slide into apathy and irrelevance".

Now, suppose I was an English mother with a talented child who very much wanted to follow a career in English Literature (if I was a Scottish mother, things would be very different as BA degrees are still free for Scottish students, meaning that the 1,820 GBP fee is usually covered by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS)). Would I encourage my child to take that path, or would I prod them instead towards a degree in ethics and robotics (in my view, the most promising one within the Humanities)? The answer is that I would not encourage my child's choice of a degree in English unless said child showed an inflexible determination and superb academic skills that might give them a chance at an academic career (and even so, I would hesitate). I believe that individuals should follow their vocations (as I did) and I would not curtail any young person's vocation. However, in the case of young persons who are not specifically inclined, I would be much more pragmatic and consider the outcome of the investment on a degree, which is major whether for a fee-paying family or for a student saddled with a loan. I happen to agree with the British Government that we need more STEM graduates because as climate change progresses we need all the scientific talent we have at hand to find urgent solutions. This does not mean we don't need graduates in English to provide us with critical tools, save the Literature of the past and bring on the Literature of the future. I just mean that we need fewer, and that the reduction in applications and in jobs is possibly part of a correction, not the end of the degrees in language and Literature. In fact, I would be much more restrictive and only admit academically outstanding students that could then reinforce the presence of language and Literature at primary and secondary school levels, for general increased literacy.

On the other hand, neither *The Guardian* nor *The Critic* mention the elephant in the room: fewer and fewer young people read, and those who do read are not necessarily interested in the books that constitute the core of the canon but mainly in YA. As I have explained again and again, although I have nothing against YA as such its misuse as a genre that invites young readers to eschew the classics (you know?, the books supposedly for adults) is catastrophic. I would invite these two publications to run a survey and ask applicants to English degrees what they have read so far. Sorry to sound so classically-minded but, whether you agree or not with their values, a person is only ready to do well at an English degree after having read canonical English Literature, apart from the books personally enjoyed. To debunk (or renew) the canon you need to a have a good knowledge of it and we just don't need English graduates who appreciate YA but have never read Austen or Dickens, or any other major author you can think of, of any identity.

And this brings me to the reasons why degrees in Literature should be maintained. You will see that this is quite difficult to justify. The acquisition of critical skills, a capacity to write well in an argumentative style, and an ability to express yourself in accurate English is not necessarily acquired from reading Literature. In fact, we don't teach students that (or mainly that), but to produce academic prose and oral presentations regardless of whether they have read the Literature we study. Perhaps advanced literacy skills could be better acquired with another type of degree, more open to the reality of the transmedia world today and less focused on Literature. And the other way round: some aspects of Literature might have to become a matter for MA degrees (for instance, Medieval Literature), whereas other genres connected with the present should have more room in Literature degrees (doesn't non-fiction help acquire advanced literacy just as well as reading novels?). The idea that the degrees should be maintained to appreciate the aesthetic values of Literature, which is what Larman is defending, makes vey little sense to me because a) few current writers really care about style, b) few readers truly appreciate style and much less so if it is found in texts of the past, c) it has been shown that style does depend on cultural, social and political conditionings.

This leads me to another major preoccupation. I have been thinking of writing a post freely expressing my position about the growing wokeism in the Humanities degrees of Anglophone universities but I have desisted. I am guilty of using critical theory and identity politics in my teaching and research, but I am growing very wary of the minefield that academic work has become. I read on a daily basis news about academics or students being cancelled for uttering this or that opinion, and I am growing very much scared of saying what I really think about many matters. If debate becomes doctrine, then debate dies, and I think that debate is dying right now. We can always discuss in which ways the texts of the past carry negative values that are no longer part of our current repertoire, but if we come to the point when –as it has happened recently in British universities– some authors, and even spelling itself, are seen as part of patriarchal oppression and, hence, rejected, we are going nowhere except to the land of the ignorant. Please note that I am speaking as a convinced feminist whose main task if to unmask patriarchy. I do not like witch-hunts, I do not like intransigence, I do not like dogmatism and if English degrees are going to go that way, then I'll keep a low profile until I retire and stop practicing Gender Studies.

Perhaps the time has come to reinvent the Humanities degrees, including English, just as the sciences degrees are constantly being reinvented. Reading these days that plenty of modern Australian Literature might disappear because so many rather recent books have gone out of print, it occurs to me that we need graduates to acquire editing skills that help preserve literary legacy. In my degree, though, we never allude to text editing. I also miss teaching my students more about how to write reviews, blog posts, other contributions to social media that might help increase general literacy (I proposed

a new subject, but my proposal was rejected). Our students have, generally speaking, no idea about what is going on in the world of Literature because we don't have a subject in which we discuss where to find the novelties, how to develop one's own criteria and so on. And we need to integrate creative writing –or be clear that we teach academic writing. I find it rather pitiful that someone with an English degree cannot write a poem (even a bad one), a short story or even a scene in a TV episode. There are many ways, you see?, to move beyond the canon and wokeism, and build new English degrees that are relevant for our times. Before it is too late.

The declining admission figures in Britain are sending a message that goes beyond the opinion of any Secretary of Education, and this message will not be answered with platitudes about the beauties of reading (which can be done with no degree) or the importance of critical skills (which can be acquired in other degrees). The time may have come to radically redraw the English degrees, not thinking of the steep fees or the employment opportunities but of what advanced literacy may mean in a 21st century society that is fast approaching the abyss of climate change, and in which we need above all persons who can persuade others to literally save our fragile civilization. For that, good rhetorical skills and a high command of English learned from reading the best authors is needed, hence the importance of protecting the English degrees though, clearly, not as they are now.

12 JULY 2021/ RETHINKING WILLY WONKA: ENJOYABLE VILLAINY

My brilliant student Pol Vinyeta has written an excellent BA dissertation on one of Roald Dahl's most popular books with the title "Don't Trust the Candy Man: A Reading of Willy Wonka's Enjoyable Villainy in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Its Film Adaptations". Pol chose this topic because it seemed that *Matilda* (his initial choice) had been dealt with in plenty of academic bibliography but there was a better chance to say something new about *Charlie.* The idea was to take my own work on villainy, *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019), and see in which ways Willy Wonka is indeed a villain, or not. We didn't realize when we started work on the dissertation that Wonka would be constant news because of the fiftieth anniversary of the first film adaptation and the announcement of a third screen version. Serendipity at work, then.

Whereas in my book I took it for granted that the male characters I focused on were downright villains, with no redeeming features whatsoever, Pol concluded in his analysis that Willy Wonka appears to be a case of partial villainy, defined by "certain villainous traits". In case you are an alien just landed on Earth and never heard of Wonka, allow me to say that in this novel for children Dahl tells the story of how this man –the world's most renowned and most seclusive chocolatier– chooses an heir for his business among the children selected to visit his fairy-tale, colourful factory. The golden admission ticket is found in one of the myriad chocolate bars for sale, which of course makes Wonka even richer when kids all over the planet start buying his products like crazy. Charlie, a little boy raised in an extremely poor family (location undisclosed), gets lucky and the novel narrates how one by one the other children suffer accidents that result in only Charlie properly finishing the visit. Only then does Wonka disclose his plans for the boy he names his new heir. Among the villainous traits that Pol described are Wonka's nonchalant cruelty towards the other children, his exploitative treatment of his imported workers the Oompa Loompas, and his sense of entitlement towards Charlie, who is not really given the chance to consider how Wonka appropriates his future. Pol's thesis is

that we do not see Wonka as a downright villain because Dahl uses humour to disguise his worst failings (and I would add because we perceive his rescuing Charlie from poverty as a positive action). Pol has called this villainy that gets away with it 'enjoyable villainy' and this is a label that intrigues me.

When one thinks of children's literature it is quite clear that Lord Voldemort is the most potent villain ever threatening a child. There is some humour in the *Harry Potter* series, usually connected with the members of the Weasley family, but there is nothing humorous at all about Voldemort. Actor Ralph Fiennes, who played him in the film series, once said that if you take away all the fantasy trappings, Voldemort is an adult man abusing a boy and this is how we need to see him. There is nothing 'enjoyable', then, in Rowling's treatment of this human monster. Perhaps, however, this is exceptional, for villains in children's fictions are often exaggerated characters and because of that they are sources of humour, even though they may be themselves humourless. Pol mentioned as a case of humourless enjoyable villain the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*. In less fanciful circumstances, this perpetually cross authoritarian woman might be the stuff of Gothic nightmares but in the context of Lewis Carroll's hyperexcited fabulation she is laughable. Likewise, in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (which I strongly recommend), Count Olaf is a source of amusement, even though his relentless persecution of the orphaned Baudelaire siblings is hardly fun for them. If we laugh at Olaf's ridiculous antics this is only because we hope (and we know) he will lose and the Baudelaires prevail.

The question is that in comparison to either the Red Queen or Count Olaf, or any other villain in children's fantasy you can think of, Willy Wonka is a very strange character. He is not at all like Olaf in wanting to deprive a child of their means of subsistence but he is not that far from Olaf in his cavalier approach to the safety of the children who visit the factory. Humour in Dahl's novel is based on the idea that, with Charlie's exception, the other kids (ages 9 to 10) are insufferable brats: Augustus Gloop is an obese boy who can't stop eating; Violet Beauregarde is an appallingly rude, gum-chewing, vain girl; Veruca Salt (surely the ugliest name ever for a little girl) is a dreadful spoiled brat, and Mike Teavee is a coach potato who only thinks of watching television. Their unseemly ends (if they end at all, it must be said) are presented by the author as well-deserved punishments and gloated over by Wonka to the consternation of the parents. In fact, the whole point of the book seems to torment these children for a) there is no reason the golden tickets could not have found their way to better children, b) Wonka could have selected his heir in many other ways, c) nice Charlie's presence among this bunch is that of an odd-man-out. Someone here is a sadist who hates a certain type of child, and I've never been sure whether this is Dahl or Wonka. Either way, the message sent is not very encouraging and seems to appeal to the lowest instincts of the young readers rather then attempt any re-education of the insufferable visitors.

Then, there is the matter of the Oompa Loompas. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was published in 1964 when it was till acceptable, it seems, to present Wonka's tireless workers as tiny exotic indigenes from an unnamed land. In the first pictorial representations the Oompa Loompas were represented as African pygmies. By 1971, when the first adaptation was filmed, this was problematic enough for them to be played by actors in orange make-up and green wigs, though said actors were dwarves. In the 2005 version by Tim Burton Indian-Kenyan actor Deep Roy, also a dwarf, was cast as all the Oompa Loompas, as if they were clones. Why Wonka's enslaved worked are short, non-white persons has been never satisfactorily explained, though there seems to be a connection with (of course) Snow White's seven companions and, more directly, with the Munchkins in L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* books. I cannot imagine, however, how this unmistakeably racist aspect of Dahl's novel is going to be treated in Paul King's forthcoming third adaptation. Ironically, Dahl wanted Charlie originally to be a black boy,

but his editors told him nobody would buy a book for children with that type of protagonist.

Because of Pol's dissertation, I have recently revisited the 1971 version with Gene Wilder as Wonka and found it a film few contemporary children might enjoy. [Reviewing] it recently in *The Guardian*, Guy Lodge calls it "a clunky film that Roald Dahl rightly hated". Apparently, even though the author appears as sole author of the script, this went through many changes he was never informed about. Dahl wanted Spike Milligan or Peter Sellers to play Wonka and, siding with him, Lodge announces in his subtitle that "The years haven't been kind to Gene Wilder and his underplayed performance as the sadistic chocolatier in a cheap and poorly made adaptation". I must say that although Wilder's creep factor is significant I found Johnny Depp's 2005 Wonka even creepier with his silly page cut and his ultra-white teeth. Pol claims that Depp's recent scandals have destroyed his performance to the eyes of adult spectators that would possibly not share this film with their children, and I would agree. Even without the scandals, though, I find very little to enjoy in Burton's version which, besides, seems to be a forerunner of the current deplorable trend to justify villainy with melodramatic stories of abuse suffered by the villains in childhood (here Wonka's father was a dentist who did not allow his son to eat sweets). The announced new film, with cute Timothée Chalamet as Wonka goes in that same direction.

For me, proof that Dahl was not sure about what *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was about is the fact the failed sequel *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972) does not deal at all with Charlie Bucket's assumption of his role as Wonka's heir but with rather nonsensical space adventure on board the magical elevator. Apparently, the original novel was inspired by Dahl's participation as a schoolboy in the testing of new products by Cadbury in the 1930s, and by its rivalry with the other great English chocolate maker, Rowntree. I think it makes perfect sense that the child Dahl's fantasy of being able to visit and maybe own the place where the secretive chocolatiers of Cadbury made their product grew into the adult writer's fantasy about Wonka's factory. I also believe that this is what made the novel so popular: not Wonka himself, the Oompa Loompas or the brats' fates, but the idea of the factory (just as *Harry Potter* appeals to kids mainly because of Hogwarts). Possibly, this is why so many outlets exploit that spirit (it seems that diverse coffee shop chains offer Willy Wonka brews for adults). In my view, though, Dahl did not make the most of his material, not knowing how to establish a relationship between Wonka and too-nice-to-be-true Charlie, and undermining the sense of wonder created by the factory with the ill-treatment the other kids get. I put myself in the shoes of Charlie's parents and I would be far from charmed by Mr. Wonka's attentions towards my child, which are pretty much proprietary, and not really clear at all (just consider why Wonka has no children of his own).

Does all this amount nonetheless to a good, solid case of 'enjoyable villainy'? I think it does, and I thank Pol for teaching me that some villains are only partially so because humour makes their villainous traits acceptable. On the whole, I would have been happier with a less ambiguous characterization for Wonka –one in which, for instance, Charlie accepts the prize but calls him to task for his awful exploitation of the Oompa Loompas who are then given proper contracts. On the other hand, though children are good at enjoying black humour, often present in TV cartoon series, I wonder what exactly they 'enjoy' when reading Dahl's *Charlie*. In *Matilda* this little girl's parents are despicable persons who must be punished and the lesson learned is that whoever neglects a child only deserves disrespect. The girl protagonist is empowered, and so are the little readers. Willy Wonka embodies Dahl's notion that bad parenting is to blame for badly-behaved children and so parents and brats are one way or another punished by him, but this is done with great cruelty and appears to have no bearing on passive Charlie's empowerment (except, of course, that he is a naturally good boy and is

rewarded for that). We might simply say that Wonka is too flamboyant and too free to bow down to anything, and this is why he is enjoyable despite his villainous traits. Still, I believe something is amiss. The humour, it seems to me, hides the shortcomings of the novel rather than be an integral part of the story of how Charlie met Wonka.

As for the new film, do we really need more villain origin stories? I should think that we don't. We need new stories, and breaking out of this constant recycling of what talented writers (like Dahl) did in the past as we consider in more depth how their works survive in our day, and the enjoyability of certain villains. Thanks Pol!

12 JULIO 2021/ PENSANDO DE NUEVO EN WILLY WONKA: LA VILLANÍA 'DISFRUTABLE'

Mi brillante estudiante Pol Vinyeta ha escrito una excelente disertación de licenciatura sobre uno de los libros más populares de Roald Dahl con el título "Don't Trust the Candy Man: A Reading of Willy Wonka's Enjoyable Villainy in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Its Film Adaptations". Pol eligió este tema porque parecía que *Matilda* (su elección inicial) había sido tratada en mucha bibliografía académica, pero había una mejor oportunidad de decir algo nuevo sobre *Charlie*. La idea era tomar mi propio trabajo sobre villanía, *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019), y ver de qué manera Willy Wonka es de hecho un villano, o no. Cuando empezamos a trabajar en la disertación no nos dimos cuenta de que Wonka sería noticia constante por el cincuentenario de la primera adaptación cinematográfica y el anuncio de una tercera versión en pantalla. ¡Pura serendipia!

Mientras que en mi libro daba por sentado que los personajes masculinos en los que me centré eran puros villanos, sin rasgos redentores de ningún tipo, Pol concluyó en su análisis que Willy Wonka parece ser un caso de villanía parcial, definida por "ciertos rasgos típicos del villanos". En caso de que seas un extraterrestre que acaba de aterrizar en la Tierra y nunca has oído hablar de Wonka, permíteme decir que en esta novela para niños Dahl cuenta la historia de cómo este hombre –el chocolatero más reconocido y solitario del mundo– elige un heredero para su negocio entre los niños seleccionados para visitar su colorista fábrica de cuento de hadas. El boleto de admisión dorado se encuentra en una de las innumerables barras de chocolate a la venta, lo que por supuesto hace que Wonka sea aún más rico cuando los niños de todo el planeta comienzan a comprar sus productos como locos. Charlie, un niño criado en una familia extremadamente pobre (de ubicación no revelada), tiene suerte y la novela narra cómo uno por uno los otros niños sufren accidentes que hacen que solo Charlie termine la visita. Solo entonces Wonka revela sus planes para el chico, a quien nombra su nuevo heredero. Entre los rasgos villanos que Pol describió están la crueldad despreocupada de Wonka hacia los otros niños, el trato explotador de sus trabajadores importados los Oompa Loompas, y el creerse con derecho sobre Charlie, a quien realmente no se le da la oportunidad de considerar cómo Wonka se apropia de su futuro. La tesis de Pol es que no vemos a Wonka como un villano directamente porque Dahl usa el humor para disfrazar sus peores fallos (y yo añadiría porque percibimos su rescate de Charlie de la pobreza como una acción positiva). Pol ha llamado a esta villanía que se sale con la suya "villanía disfrutable" y esta es una etiqueta que me intriga.

Cuando uno piensa en la literatura infantil está bastante claro que Lord Voldemort es el villano más potente que jamás ha amenazado a un niño. Hay algo de humor en la serie *Harry Potter*, generalmente asociado con los miembros de la familia Weasley, pero no hay nada humorístico en absoluto en Voldemort. El actor Ralph Fiennes, quien lo

interpretó en la serie de películas, dijo una vez que si quitas todas la fantasía, Voldemort es un hombre adulto que abusa de un niño y así es como tenemos que verlo. No hay nada 'disfrutable', así pues, en el tratamiento que Rowling le da a este monstruo humano. Quizás, sin embargo, esto sea excepcional, ya que los villanos en las ficciones infantiles suelen ser personajes exagerados y por eso son fuentes de humor, aunque ellos mismos puedan ser personas carentes de humor. Pol mencionó como caso de villano agradable sin humor la Reina Roja en *Alicia en el País de las Maravillas*. En circunstancias menos fantasiosas, esta mujer autoritaria perpetuamente airada podría ser tema de pesadillas góticas, pero en el contexto de la fabulación hiperexcitada de Lewis Carroll es risible. Del mismo modo, en el *A Series of Unfortunate Events* de Lemony Snicket (que recomiendo encarecidamente), el Conde Olaf es una fuente de diversión, a pesar de que su implacable persecución de los hermanos Baudelaire no es nada divertida para ellos. Si nos reímos de las ridículas travesuras de Olaf es solo porque esperamos que pierda y los Baudelaire se impongan, como sabemos que pasará.

La cuestión es que en comparación con la Reina Roja o el Conde Olaf, o cualquier otro villano de fantasía infantil que se te ocurra, Willy Wonka es un personaje muy extraño. No se parece en absoluto a Olaf en querer privar a un niño de sus medio de subsistencia, pero no está tan lejos de Olaf en su enfoque despreocupado sobre la seguridad de los niños que visitan la fábrica. El humor en la novela de Dahl se basa en la idea de que, con la excepción de Charlie, los otros niños (de 9 a 10 años) son mocosos insufribles: Augustus Gloop es un niño obeso que no puede dejar de comer; Violet Beauregarde es una chica terriblemente grosera, masticadora de chicles y vanidosa; Veruca Salt (seguramente el nombre más feo de la historia para una niña) es una terrible mocosa malcriada, y Mike Teavee es un ratón de sofá que solo piensa en ver la televisión. Sus finales indecorosos (si es que son finales, hay que decirlo) son presentados por el autor como castigos bien merecidos en los que Wonka se regodea para consternación de los padres. De hecho, el propósito final del libro parece ser atormentar a estos niños porque a) no hay ninguna razón por la que los boletos de oro no podrían haber caído en manos de mejores niños, b) Wonka podría haber seleccionado a su heredero de muchas otras maneras, c) la presencia de Charlie entre este grupo es la de la excepción que confirma la regla. Alguien aquí es un sádico que odia a cierto tipo de niño, y nunca he estado segura de si el sádico es Dahl o Wonka. De cualquier manera, el mensaje enviado no es muy alentador y parece apelar a los instintos más bajos de los jóvenes lectores en lugar de intentar cualquier reeducación de los insufribles visitantes.

Luego está el asunto de los Oompa Loompas. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* fue publicado en 1964 cuando aún era aceptable, al parecer, presentar a los incansables trabajadores de Wonka como pequeños indígenas exóticos de una tierra sin nombre. En las primeras representaciones ilustradas los Oompa Loompas fueron representados como pigmeos africanos. En 1971, cuando se filmó la primera adaptación, esto era lo suficientemente problemático como para que fueran interpretados por actores con maquillaje naranja y pelucas verdes, aunque dichos actores eran enanos. En la versión de 2005 de Tim Burton, el actor indio-keniano Deep Roy, también enano, interpretó a todos los Oompa Loompas, como si fueran clones. Por qué los trabajadores esclavizados de Wonka son personas bajas y no blancas nunca se ha explicado satisfactoriamente, aunque parece haber una conexión con (por supuesto) los siete compañeros de Blancanieves y, más directamente, con los Munchkins en los libros sobre el Mago de Oz de L. Frank Baum. No puedo imaginar, sin embargo, cómo se va a tratar este aspecto inconfundiblemente racista de la novela de Dahl en la próxima tercera adaptación de Paul King. Irónicamente, Dahl quería que Charlie fuera originalmente un niño negro, pero sus editores le dijeron que nadie compraría un libro para niños con ese tipo de protagonista.

Debido a la disertación de Pol, recientemente he revisitado la versión de 1971 con Gene Wilder como Wonka y la encontré una película que pocos niños contemporáneos podrían disfrutar. [Reseñándola](#) recientemente en *The Guardian*, Guy Lodge la llama "una película torpe que Roald Dahl odiaba con razón". Al parecer, a pesar de que el autor aparece como único autor del guion, este pasó por muchos cambios de los que nunca fue informado. Dahl quería que Spike Milligan o Peter Sellers interpretaran a Wonka y, alineándose con él, Lodge anuncia en su subtítulo que "Los años no han sido amables con Gene Wilder y su actuación sobrevalorada como el sádico chocolatero en una adaptación barata y mal hecha". Debo decir que aunque Wilder es algo inquietante, encontré el Wonka de 2005 de Johnny Depp aún más espeluznante, con su absurdo corte pelo al estilo paje y sus dientes ultrablancos. Pol afirma que los recientes escándalos de Depp han destruido su actuación a los ojos de espectadores adultos que posiblemente no compartirían esta película con sus hijos, y yo estaría de acuerdo. Incluso sin los escándalos, sin embargo, encuentro muy poco que disfrutar en la versión de Burton que, además, parece ser precursora de la deplorable tendencia actual a justificar la villanía con historias melodramáticas de abuso sufrido por los villanos en la infancia (aquí el padre de Wonka era un dentista que no permitía que su hijo comiera dulces). La nueva película anunciada, con el monísimo Timothée Chalamet como Wonka va en esa misma dirección.

Para mí, la prueba de que Dahl no estaba seguro de hacia dónde iba *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* es el hecho de que la fallida secuela *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972) no trata en absoluto de cómo Charlie Bucket se enfrenta a su papel como heredero de Wonka, sino que es una aventura espacial bastante absurda a bordo del ascensor mágico. Aparentemente, la novela original se inspiró en la participación de Dahl siendo aún un colegial en las pruebas de nuevos productos de Cadbury en la década de 1930, y en su rivalidad con el otro gran fabricante de chocolate inglés, Rowntree. Creo que tiene mucho sentido que la fantasía del niño Dahl de poder visitar y tal vez ser dueño del lugar donde los chocolateros de Cadbury hacían sus productos en secreto se convirtiera en la fantasía del escritor adulto sobre la fábrica de Wonka. También creo que esto es lo que hizo que la novela fuera tan popular: no el propio Wonka, los Oompa Loompas o los destinos crueles de los mocosos, sino la idea de la fábrica (al igual que *Harry Potter* atrae a los niños principalmente debido a Hogwarts). Posiblemente, esta es la razón por la que tantos locales comerciales explotan ese espíritu (parece que diversas cadenas de cafeterías ofrecen cafés Willy Wonka para adultos). En mi opinión, sin embargo, Dahl no hizo el máximo provecho de su material: no supo establecer una relación entre Wonka y el buenazo de Charlie, y socavó la sensación de asombro creada por la fábrica con el maltrato que reciben los otros niños. Si me pongo en la piel de los padres de Charlie estaría lejos de estar encantada con las atenciones del Sr. Wonka hacia mi hijo, que son prácticamente las de un propietario y no están realmente claras en absoluto (solo hay que pensar en por qué Wonka no tiene hijos propios).

¿Equivale todo esto, no obstante, a un caso bueno y sólido de 'villanía disfrutable'? Creo que sí, y agradezco a Pol que me haya enseñado que algunos villanos solo lo son parcialmente porque el humor hace que sus peores rasgos sean aceptables. En general, me habría gustado más una caracterización menos ambigua para Wonka, una en la que, por ejemplo, Charlie acepta el premio pero le echa en cara su horrible explotación de los Oompa Loompas, que luego reciben contratos adecuados. Por otro lado, aunque los niños disfrutan del humor negro, a menudo presente en las series de dibujos animados de televisión, me pregunto qué es exactamente lo que 'disfrutan' al leer *Charlie*. En *Matilda* los padres de esta niña son personas despreciables que deben ser castigadas y la lección aprendida es que quien descuida a un niño solo merece falta de respeto. La niña protagonista queda empoderada, así como los pequeños lectores. Willy Wonka encarna la noción de Dahl de que la mala educación es culpa de los niños

mal criados, y por lo tanto los padres y sus mocosos son de una manera u otra castigados por él, pero esto se hace con gran crueldad y parece no tener ninguna relación con el empoderamiento pasivo de Charlie (excepto, por supuesto, que se trata de un chico naturalmente bueno recompensado por serlo). Simplemente podríamos decir que Wonka es demasiado extravagante y demasiado libre como para inclinarse ante cualquier cosa, y es por eso que es agradable a pesar de sus rasgos villanos. Aun así, creo que algo no funciona. El humor, me parece, oculta las deficiencias de la novela en lugar de ser una parte integral de la historia de cómo Charlie conoció a Wonka.

En cuanto a la nueva película, ¿realmente necesitamos más historias sobre los orígenes de los villanos? Diría que no. Necesitamos nuevas historias, y salir de este reciclaje constante de lo que los escritores talentosos (como Dahl) hicieron en el pasado, a medida que consideramos en mayor profundidad cómo sus obras sobreviven en nuestros días, y apreciamos la disfrutabilidad de ciertos villanos. ¡Gracias Pol!

26 JULY 2021/ REDEFINING GOTHIC FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is no volume called *An Introduction to Gothic*. The closest title is Nick Groom's *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012), though it could be said that the real introduction to Gothic was David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980, expanded into two volumes 1994 and 1996). In contrast, there are a few introductory volumes bearing the word 'companion' in their title, a concept that mystifies me. The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'companion' as "the type of book that gives you information on a particular subject or tells you how to do something", and this seems to me to include both the introduction and the handbook. I have checked WordReference for a synonym of Spanish 'introducción' to make sure there is no equivalent of 'companion', and there is none ('compendio' seems to be as similar as possible but it is not used as frequently as 'companion' is, nor in the same sense).

I am thinking of this matter after having read and enjoyed very much Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes' edited volume *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2019), now new in paperback (at the very affordable price of 25 euros, what a miracle!!!). I want to discuss here not only this volume but, a little bit, the history of the companion in the field of Gothic studies. As far as I know, the first volume of this kind was David Punter's edited volume *A Companion to the Gothic* (Blackwell, 2000), re-issued as *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012). By definition, companions are collective volumes because no single scholar can cover the whole field under analysis (though, of course, single-authorship is more common in companions focused on a narrower field, or topic). Next came Jerrold E. Hogle's *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), and this was apparently the last companion to deal with Gothic in general. From Hogle's own *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (2014) onward, the word Gothic carries some adjective in the titles of companions. This holds for Andrew Smith's *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2014), Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic* (2017), Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam's *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion* (2017), Angela Wright's *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2016) and Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà's *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2020). David Punter's *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts* (2019) is slightly different. And the novelty in Wester and Aldana Reyes's volume is that the title refers to a century, not a period (Victorian, Romantic, Modern).

Reading this volume I realize it has created for good a new entity, so far unknown: there is talk of 19th century Gothic but we need to start thinking now of 20th century Gothic as a distinct entity beyond being the chronological predecessor of 21st century Gothic. This is 2021 and, logically, there is sufficient ground to think of contemporary cultural movements as different from 20th century currents. Yet, two factors complicate matters: one is that at least half the Gothic scholars, if not two thirds, working right now are old enough to remember the 1980s (and even the 1970s or 1960s) as part of their life experience; the other is that in Gothic terms the distance between 1980 (when Punter published his seminal volume) and 2021 is much smaller than the distance between 1940 and 1980. Before you think I am crazy what I mean is that although, for instance, there were in the 1980s remakes of classic 1940s Gothic films (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943), a) there was a clear perception that they belonged to a distant period/cycle, b) the 1980s generated many new horror stories. In contrast, the new *Alien* TV series now shooting is being produced by Ridley Scott, the same man who directed the first title in the franchise back in 1979. The series might be 21st century Gothic but it is at heart a 20th century product lagging behind its time. This does not mean that cultural time has become completely static, but that recycling has now a weight it has not had in previous Gothic periods.

Xavier Aldana Reyes was not even born when David Punter published *The Literature of Terror* and he can be said to be a third-generation Gothic scholar (taking Punter as part of the first, and I myself as part of the second, though I can no longer call myself a Gothic scholar). Maisha Wester appears to be of the same third generation. At any rate, what worries me is not the age of the editors but the age of most readers of the companion who are more likely to be, I think, young students than ageing scholars. Of course, it might well be that I am totally wrong given the undergrads' disinclination to buying books. My point is that I am old enough to have read Punter's 2000 pioneering companion when it was published and this new companion, which means that I have a more or less complete historical overview of the whole Gothic genre. My doubt, though, is whether undergrad or post-graduate readers of the 21st century companion will go back to the Punter and the Hogle companions to understand what went on before the 21st century. Ann Radcliffe, to cite a canonical name, is mentioned twice in the new companion, which suggests that it is aimed at readers who have done their homework and do know the classics, but I constantly worry that presentism may destroy any wide-ranging, historical approach and that, in short, younger scholars may know *The Walking Dead* but never read *The Castle of Otranto*, where Gothic did begin.

Twenty-First Century Gothic is subdivided into four parts: I. Updating the Tradition (with chapters on Postcolonial, Queer, Postfeminist, Neoliberal Gothic, and Gothic digital technologies), II. Contemporary Monsters (zombies, vampires, serial killers, ghosts, werewolves), III. Contemporary Subgenres (New Weird, Ecogothic, Comedy, Steampunk, Posthuman Gothic) and IV. Ethnogothic (South African, Asian, Latin American, Aboriginal, Black Diasporic Gothic). My favourite chapter was Joseph Crawford's discussion of Gothic digital technologies because it was the one where I found the most innovative side of current Gothic. As you can see from the titles of the chapters about today's Gothic monsters, there are no new additions to the classic gallery even though there may be many differences between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga. What has changed most radically since the 1990s, when I wrote my own dissertation on monsters, is that now most Gothic texts are TV series (that is one reason for my disconnection, since I don't like series). In general, I felt pretty lost reading the volume particularly in relation to the last fifteen years, when Eli Roth's gory porn-torture fest *Hostel* (2005) pushed me towards science fiction for good. As happens with any companion or introduction, then, I felt happy when I could follow the discussion and hopelessly disoriented when I could not, rather snowed under an avalanche of new titles.

And here's the main problem: one could catch up fifteen years ago, when novels and films were the rule, but now who can catch up with new Gothic when that requires watching series eight or ten seasons long…? A serious problem…

Regarding the ethnogothic segment, I am conflicted about how non-US/UK Gothic should be represented in companions. In Punter's 2000 volume, there are articles on European (?) and Irish Gothic. In Hogle's 2002 companion, there are chapters on 'continental Gothic' (for God's sake!), Scottish and Irish Gothic, English Gothic (theatre) and 'colonial and post-colonial' Gothic. The 2012 revision by Punter of his 2000 companion includes chapters on 'global' Gothic, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian Gothic and, surprisingly, separate chapters for Asian and Japanese Gothic (so, where is Japan…?). Hogle's *Companion to Modern Gothic* has a section called 'Multi-cultural and Global Gothic', with the essay "Gothic and the Politics of Race" by Maisha L. Wester herself, another one called "The Gothic in North American 'subcultures'" (whatever that may mean) and yet again chapters on "The postcolonial Gothic" and "Asian Gothic" (by Katarzyna Ancuta, also the author of the marvellous "Asian Gothic" chapter in the 21st century companion).

As for 'ethnogothic' (or 'ethno-gothic'), there is an article in the 2016 companion to American Gothic by Arthur Redding, which seems to have consolidated the label. In his blog Matthew Teutsch refers to the article "Deep Roots/Rich Soil: Race, Horror and the Ethnogothic" by John Ira Jennings and Stanford Carpenter in which it is explained that "the EthnoGothic deals with primarily speculative narratives that actively engage with negatively affective and racially oriented psychological traumas via the traditions of Gothic tropes and technologies". The problem with this label, I think, is that I fail to see how concepts as diverse as South African Gothic, Asian Gothic, Latin American Gothic, Aboriginal Gothic and Black Diasporic Gothic can be dealt with from the same angle. If the angle is more or less the same one post-colonial used to cover, then the presence of imperialistic Japan in the discussion is odd. Considering language, I am not very happy with the inclusion in the same box of Anglophone and non-Anglophone areas. And the mixture of the geographical and the racial seems to me unstable. I am also made nervous by the categorization of non-white, non-US/UK writing as 'ethnic' as if white US-UK writers were not themselves part of ethnic groups, too. I know that Maisha Wester has done plenty of outstanding work on race and that she is much better qualified than me to deal with this question but I still find the label 'ethnogothic' extremely problematic. Think of where Spanish Gothic should be placed in a future companion to global gothic, and you will see where I am going with this.

I have in any case, enjoyed very much this volume, which announces itself as "the first transnational and transmedia companion to the post-millennial Gothic", and responds very well to this ambitious presentation. It is very hard to take a snapshot of any given genre at a point in time, since, like naughty kids, texts and authors never stand still. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is now 257 years old and who could have imagined that Gothic would be still alive today, though in such a different shape? Or shapes, as you will discover from this excellent companion.

26 JULIO 2021/ UNA REDEFINICIÓN DEL GÓTICO PARA EL SIGLO XXI

No hay ningún volumen llamado *Una introducción al gótico.* El título más aproximado es *Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012) de Nick Groom, aunque se podría decir que la verdadera introducción al gótico fue *The Literature of Terror* (1980, ampliada a dos volúmenes en 1994 y 1996). Por el contrario, hay algunos volúmenes introductorios que llevan la palabra 'companion' (literalmente "compañero") en su título, un concepto que me desconcierta. El Diccionario de Cambridge define "companion" como "el tipo de libro que da información sobre un tema en particular o dice cómo hacer algo", definición que, según pienso, incluye tanto la introducción como el manual. He comprobado si WordReference ofrece un sinónimo para el vocablo castellano 'introducción' por si hubiera un equivalente de 'compañero', y no hay ninguno ('compendio' parece similar pero no se utiliza con tanta frecuencia como 'companion', ni en el mismo sentido).

Estoy pensando en este asunto después de haber leído (y disfrutado mucho) el volumen editado por Maisha Wester y Xavier Aldana Reyes *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2019), ahora por fin en rústica (al muy asequible precio de 25 euros, ¡¡¡milagro!!!). Quiero comentar aquí no sólo este volumen sino, un poco, la historia del 'companion' en el campo de los Estudios Góticos. Que yo sepa, el primer volumen de este tipo fue el libro editado por David Punter *A Companion to the Gothic* (Blackwell, 2000), reeditado por él mismo como *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012). Por definición, los 'companions' son volúmenes colectivos porque ningún erudito puede cubrir todo el campo analizado (aunque, por supuesto, la autoría única es más común en los 'companions' centrados en un campo o tema menos amplios). Luego vino *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002) de Jerrold E. Hogle, aparentemente el último 'companion' en tratar del gótico en general. A partir de *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Gothic* (2014) del propio Hogle, la palabra gótico lleva algún adjetivo en los títulos de los 'companions'. Esto es válido para *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2014) de Andrew Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic* (2017) de Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion* (2017) de Joel Faflak y Jason Haslam, *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2016) de Angela Wright y *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2020) de Carol Margaret Davison y Monica Germanà. *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts* (2019) de David Punter es ligeramente distinto. Y la novedad en el volumen de Wester y Aldana Reyes es que el título se refiere a un siglo, no a un período (Victoriano, Romántico, Moderno).

Leyendo este volumen me doy cuenta de que ha creado para siempre una nueva entidad, hasta ahora desconocida: se habla de gótico del siglo XIX pero tenemos que empezar a pensar ahora en el gótico del siglo XX como una entidad independiente más allá de ser el predecesor cronológico del gótico del siglo XXI. Estamos en 2021 y, lógicamente, hay suficiente fundamento para pensar que los movimientos culturales contemporáneos son diferentes de las corrientes del siglo XX. Sin embargo, dos factores complican las cosas: uno es que al menos la mitad de los eruditos góticos, si no dos tercios, que trabajan en este momento son lo suficientemente mayores como para recordar la década de 1980 (e incluso la década de 1970 o 1960) como parte de su experiencia de vida; la otra es que en términos góticos la distancia entre 1980 (cuando Punter publicó su volumen seminal) y 2021 es mucho menor que la distancia entre 1940 y 1980. Antes de que penséis que estoy loca, lo que quiero decir es que aunque, por ejemplo, hubo en la década de 1980 remakes de películas góticas clásicas de la década de 1940 (*Dr. Jekyll y Mr. Hyde* (1941), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943)), a) había una percepción clara de que pertenecían a un período/ ciclo distante, b) la década de 1980 generó muchas historias de terror nuevas. En

contraste, la nueva serie de televisión *Alien* que ahora se está rodando está siendo producida por Ridley Scott, el mismo hombre que dirigió el primer título de la franquicia en 1979. Esta serie puede ser gótico del siglo XXI, pero es en el fondo un producto del siglo XX muy rezagado. Esto no significa que el tiempo cultural se haya vuelto completamente estático, sino que el reciclaje tiene ahora un peso que no ha tenido en períodos góticos anteriores.

Xavier Aldana Reyes ni siquiera había nacido cuando David Punter publicó *The Literature of Terror* y se puede decir que es un erudito gótico de tercera generación (tomando a Punter como parte de la primera, y a mí misma como parte de la segunda, aunque ya no puedo llamarme erudita gótica). Maisha Wester parece ser de la misma tercera generación. En cualquier caso, lo que me preocupa no es la edad de los editores, sino la edad de la mayoría de los lectores potenciales del 'companion', lectores que tienen más probabilidades de ser, creo, jóvenes estudiantes que estudiosos con décadas de carrera. Por supuesto, es muy posible que esté totalmente equivocada dada la poca de inclinación de los estudiantes de grado y post-grado a la compra de libros. Mi argumento es que tengo la edad suficiente para haber leído a el 'companion' pionero de Punter cuando se publicó en 2000 y este nuevo 'companion', lo que significa que tengo una visión histórica más o menos completa de todo el género gótico. Mi duda, sin embargo, es si los lectores de grado o posgrado del 'companion' del siglo XXI leerán los de Punter y Hogle para entender lo que sucedió antes de 2020. Ann Radcliffe, por citar un nombre canónico, se menciona dos veces en el nuevo 'comapnion', lo que sugiere que está dirigido a lectores que han hecho los deberes y conocen los clásicos, pero me preocupa constantemente que el presentismo pueda destruir cualquier enfoque histórico de amplio alcance y que, en resumen, los estudiosos más jóvenes puedan conocer *The Walking Dead* pero nunca leer *The Castle of Otranto,* donde comenzó el gótico.

Twenty-First-Century Gothic se subdivide en cuatro partes: I. Actualización de la tradición (con capítulos sobre gótico postcolonial, *queer*, postfeminista, neoliberal y digital), II. Monstruos contemporáneos (zombis, vampiros, asesinos en serie, fantasmas, hombres lobo), III. Subgéneros contemporáneos (*New Weird*, ecogótico, comedia, *steampunk*, gótico posthumano) y IV. Etnogótico (sudafricano, asiático, latinoamericano, aborigen, y gótico de la diáspora negra). Mi capítulo favorito es el de Joseph Crawford sobre las tecnologías digitales góticas, quizás porque veo en este texto el lado más innovador del gótico actual. Como se puede ver en los títulos de los capítulos sobre los monstruos góticos de hoy, no hay novedades en la galería clásica, aunque puede haber muchas diferencias entre *Drácula* de Bram Stoker y la saga *Crepúsculo* de Stephanie Meyer. Lo que ha cambiado más radicalmente desde la década de 1990, cuando escribí mi propia tesis doctoral sobre monstruos, es que ahora la mayoría de los textos góticos son series de televisión (esa es una de las razones de mi desconexión, ya que no me gustan las series). En general, me he sentido bastante perdida leyendo el volumen, particularmente en relación con los últimos quince años, cuando el sangriento festival de porno-tortura que Eli Roth ofrece en *Hostel* (2005) me empujó hacia la ciencia ficción para siempre. Como sucede con cualquier introducción, así pues, me sentí feliz cuando pude seguir el análisis e irremediablemente desorientada cuando no pude, enterrada bajo una avalancha de títulos desconocidos para mi. Y aquí está el principal problema: una podía ponerse al día hace quince años, cuando las novelas y las películas eran la regla, pero ahora ¿quién puede ponerse al día del nuevo gótico cuando eso requiere ver series de ocho o diez temporadas de duración...? Es un problema grave...

Con respecto al segmento etnogótico, me provoca muchas dudas acerca de cómo el gótico producido fuera de EE.UU. y el Reino Unido debe ser representado en los volúmenes introductorios. En el volumen de Punter de 2000, hay artículos sobre el gótico europeo (?) e irlandés. En el 'companion' de Hogle de 2002, hay capítulos sobre

el 'gótico continental' (¡por el amor de Dios!), el gótico escocés e irlandés, el gótico inglés (teatro) y el gótico 'colonial y poscolonial'. La revisión de 2012 hecha por Punter de su 'companion' de 2000 incluye capítulos sobre gótico 'global', australiano, neozelandés, canadiense y, sorprendentemente, capítulos separados para el gótico asiático y el japonés (entonces, ¿dónde está Japón...?). El *Companion to Modern Gothic* de Hogle tiene una sección llamada 'Gótico Multi-cultural y Global', con el ensayo "Gothic and the Politics of Race" de la propia Maisha L. Wester, otro llamada "The Gothic in North American 'subcultures'" (lo que sea que eso signifique) y una vez más capítulos sobre "The postcolonial Gothic" y "Asian Gothic" (éste último escrito por Katarzyna Ancuta, también autora del capítulo "Asian Gothic" en el volumen sobre el siglo XXI).

En cuanto a la etiqueta 'etnogótico' (o 'etno-gótico'), hay un artículo de Arthur Redding en el 'companion' de 2016 sobre gótico americano, que parece haber consolidado la nomenclatura. En su blog Matthew Teutsch se refiere al artículo "Deep Roots/Rich Soil: Race, Horror and the Ethnogothic" de John Ira Jennings y Stanford Carpenter en el que se explica que "el Etno-Gótico se ocupa de narrativas principalmente especulativas que se involucran activamente en los traumas psicológicos negativamente afectivos y racialmente orientados a través de las tradiciones, tropos y tecnologías góticas". El problema de esta etiqueta, pienso, es que no veo cómo conceptos tan diversos como el gótico sudafricano, el gótico asiático, el gótico latinoamericano, el gótico aborigen y el gótico diaspórico negro se pueden tratar desde el mismo ángulo. Si el ángulo es más o menos el mismo que solía cubrir el adjetivo postcolonial, entonces la presencia del Japón imperialista en la discusión es extraña. Teniendo en cuenta el lenguaje, tampoco me complace la inclusión en la misma categoría de áreas anglófonas y no anglófonas. Y la mezcla de lo geográfico y lo racial me parece inestable. También me pone nerviosa la categorización de la escritura no blanca y no estadounidense/británica como "étnica" como si los escritores blancos de Estados Unidos y el Reino Unido no fueran ellos mismos parte de grupos étnicos. Sé que Maisha Wester ha hecho mucho trabajo excepcional sobre cuestiones raciales y que ella está mucho mejor cualificada que yo para abordar esta cuestión, pero lo cierto es que encuentro la etiqueta 'etnogótica' extremadamente problemática. Pensad en dónde debería colocarse el gótico español en un futuro 'companion' del gótico global, y veréis qué me preocupa.

En cualquier caso, he disfrutado mucho de este volumen, que se anuncia como "el primer 'companion' transnacional y transmedia del gótico post-milenario", y responde con creces a esta ambiciosa presentación. Es muy difícil tomar una instantánea de un género determinado en un momento dado, ya que, como los niños traviesos, los textos y los autores nunca se quedan quietos. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) tiene ya 257 años y ¿quién podría haber imaginado que el gótico seguiría vivo hoy en día, aunque en una forma tan diferente? O formas, como descubriréis en este excelente 'companion' que es sin duda alguna un muy buen 'acompañante'.

30 AUGUST 2021/ HISTORY HAPPENING: THE END OF SUMMER, KABUL AND KATHARINE

The structure of the academic year makes summer the strangest of seasons, with a first month in which one is too exhausted to properly think just when a little bit of time for writing nonstop materializes, a second month when one is supposed to forget about all matters academic but cannot really do that, and a third month which marks a new beginning more than January does. That was a long sentence, but much happens indeed between 21 June and 21 September every year academically speaking. For this

particular blog, this post is, besides, a moment of reckoning and closure since it concludes the yearly volume I publish as a .pdf in the digital repository of my university. Believe it or not, this will be volume number eleven. And, yes, I'm planning to continue writing, though part of my energy is flagging because the world really is in a terrible state, much more so if you're a woman. It is hard not to fall into a dark mood these days, and I don't think I will be able to escape depression today. I don't mean personal depression but this general feeling that we, human beings, are not doing well at all.

To begin with, as I write hurricane Ida is devastating Louisiana on the same date when fifteen years ago hurricane Katrina almost erased New Orleans. Ida, we are being told, appears to be the most powerful hurricane in 150 years but one thing we know now is that while hurricanes used to be a product of the forces of nature in the past, they are now the bastard children of manmade climate change, too. Something very similar can be said about pandemics, with Covid-19 being proof of the excesses we go on committing in our dealings with animals. As if its murderous effects were not enough, eighteen months after the onset of the crisis in Wuhan, the scientists have now confirmed that we are on the brink of certain extinction because of the brutal climate change patterns, unless we do something urgently—which we will not do. I had high hopes that Covid-19 would change how people behave, turning us into more prudent and solidary community members. Yet the images these days of thousands of drunk youths acting like barbarians in the streets of Barcelona once the curfew has been lifted shows that something fundamental is wrong. No matter how few they are, these people and the anti-vaxxers, and the virus negationists—and the greedy pharmas and obtuse governments—reveal that as a species we are suicidal. Expecting the species to alter the path of climate change when we are unable to protect our fellow human beings from a deadly virus is almost preposterous. This is not who we are.

Add to this the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and the resurgence of ISIS in Afghanistan. I must confess that I have been avoiding the more detailed reports coming from that corner of the world and just paying attention basically to the headlines, cowardly trying to bury my head in the sand to pretend that the end of the Afghan War is not connected to my world. Of course, the sudden imprisonment of all Afghan women under sharia law affects all of us, the women that constitute 51% of the *Homo Sapiens* species but that live as a helpless minority. The fall of Kabul is not at all comparable to the fall of Saigon in 1975 to the Communists, which has so often been commented on this summer. In the end, and unlike what the domino doctrine behind the Vietnam War preached, Communism did not conquer the world after 1975. My deep worry is that in contrast other countries will follow the patriarchal dictatorship now established in Kabul, with not only Afghan women's rights being lost but those of all women. You need not be a fan of *The Handmaid's Tale* to understand that the future might quickly become worse than the past. On the other hand, both Syria (now forgotten in the news) and Afghanistan make me think of how the worst excesses can happen in daylight and in the face of the international press without anyone being able to stop them. It took a mighty alliance to stop Hitler's army of darkness in 1945 but the UN and NATO have been unable to stop the far less powerful Taliban in a catastrophic failure of nerve (and, let's say it, of military know-how) that will have terrible consequences for women, LGTBIQ+ persons, and non-patriarchal men all over the world. Terrorism will join forces with Covid-19 and climate change to make human life on Earth even worse than it already is.

Try to educate young persons in the middle of all this for the future. My project-oriented subject for this year is a semestral course on women in current pop music, an idea intended to cheer us up which now sounds to me a bit irrelevant. Of course, you never know these days what is really relevant—Leo Messi's torrent of tears in his farewell press conference in Barcelona seemed to be very relevant to the state of masculinity these days but perhaps what is more relevant is how quickly we saw him smiling once

the torrent of millions from Paris Saint-Germain fell on his lap. But I digress. The Taliban have forbidden all music in Afghanistan, having already executed key figures such as folk singer Fawad Andarabi. Discussing in this context the empowerment of women through their musical careers is chilling. Even the most trivial wannabe star takes on an enormous importance as a figure of anti-patriarchal dissent in ways I had never considered when designing the course. On the other hand, I very much suspect that once we listen to what current Anglophone female stars do say in their songs, we will grow more sceptical about their empowerment. As we are learning in Kabul—and not so far in local social media— we women are always one step away from being silenced no matter how vocal we may be. My intention in any case is to share with my students the pleasure of hearing women sing loudly and beautifully, as so many do. I was going to write 'for as long as we can' but perhaps that's self-defeating.

Perhaps because of the constant threat of being cancelled by patriarchy, in this summer of apocalyptic proportions I have found much comfort in the memoirs of Katharine Graham, the woman who owned and ran *The Washington Post* for decades. As a young person I was a fan of TV series *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), the spin-off of popular sitcom *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) starring Ed Asner, the excellent actor who died yesterday (he was also the voice of grumpy Carl Fredricksen in *Up!*). Grant's boss in *Los Angeles Tribune* was the formidable Margaret Jones Pynchon (played by Nancy Marchand), a composite character, Wikipedia informs, merging "real-life newspaper executives Dorothy Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times* and Katharine Graham of *The Washington Post*". Later, I came across Graham herself as played by Meryl Streep in Steven Spielberg's undervalued *The Post* (2017), on the crisis caused when the Nixon administration tried to ban all US papers from publishing the Pentagon Papers leaked by whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg. In Graham's memoirs, Pulitzer-award winning volume *Personal History* (1997), this episode looms large, but the lesson on how to protect the freedom of the press she offers is nothing compared to her teachings about how marginal women were in journalism when she was suddenly empowered.

Basically, Graham's patriarchal father Eugene Meyer could never see his daughter as his heir in *The Post* and so he chose his son-in-law Phil Graham to play that role. While Katharine lived the busy life of the upper-class wife, mother and society hostess, Phil went the downward spiral, plagued by thoughts that he had not succeeded because of his merits but for being his wife's husband. Unable to deal with his own male chauvinism, Phil took his life, which left a shocked Katharine at the helm of *The Post* when she least expected it, aged 46. Her memoirs are often painful to read for the constant insecurity she shows at all times, even when she was one of the most powerful women on Earth. The elderly Katharine (she published the memoirs four years before her death in 2001, aged 84) narrates her life not as a woman who was a feminist from the start but as a woman who discovered feminism once she was empowered and who is appalled at her own naivete as a younger woman. It could not be otherwise given her background and the times. Tellingly, Katharine inherited *The Post* in 1963, the year when Betty Friedan jump-started second-wave feminism with *The Feminine Mystique*. Graham's many comments about being the only woman in her professional circle (and how this constricted the socializing habits of her male peers, spoiling their sexist pleasures) remind us of how lonely a figure she was only sixty years ago. Many things have changed but tell that to the female journalists now fleeing Afghanistan (or trapped there).

Kabul and Katharine have taught me this summer, in short, that if living one's life as a woman is complicated enough, being subjected to the patriarchal forces of history makes any illusion of personal control naïve and even dangerous. Frankly, I do not know where we are going as human beings, which is why I am sure I will find much comfort in going back to teaching Victorian Literature, since Victorians had a clear sense of progress, including the women who invented first-wave feminism. There was a moment

in the 1990s when it seemed Homo Sapiens might have a chance to establish a truly enlightened multicultural global culture but that was revealed to be a false impression generated by the interests of multinational corporations, gleefully celebrating the end of Communism. Then came 9/11, the tragic wake-up call to the real nature of (in)human civilization whose twentieth anniversary will happen in a couple of weeks. Since then, we seem unable as a collectivity to find a new solid horizon, a sense of the future, a project for us and our planet. I would not mind so much for myself, but I have young people to educate, most of them women, and I am just wondering out loud how to do it with enthusiasm and hope for their future. I'm listening if you have any ideas.

30 DE AGOSTO DE 2021/ LA HISTORIA EN VIVO: EL VERANO, KABUL Y KATHARINE

La estructura del año académico hace que el verano sea la más extraña de las estaciones, con un primer mes en el que una está demasiado agotada para pensar adecuadamente justo cuando se materializa un poco de tiempo para escribir sin parar, un segundo mes en el que se supone que una debe olvidarse de todos los asuntos académicos pero realmente no puede hacerlo, y un tercer mes que marca un nuevo comienzo más de lo que lo hace enero. Esta es una frase muy larga, pero mucho sucede entre el 21 de junio y el 21 de septiembre de cada año académicamente hablando. Para este blog en particular, este post es, además, un momento de ajuste de cuentas y cierre ya que concluye el volumen anual que publico como .pdf en el repositorio digital de mi universidad. Lo creas o no, este será el volumen número once. Y, sí, pienso seguir escribiendo, aunque parte de mi energía está flaqueando porque el mundo realmente está en un estado terrible, mucho más si eres mujer. Es difícil no caer en un estado de ánimo oscuro en estos días, y no creo que pueda escapar de la depresión hoy. No me refiero a la depresión personal, sino a este sentimiento general de que a nosotros, los seres humanos, no nos va nada bien.

Para empezar, mientras escribo, el huracán Ida está devastando Luisiana en la misma fecha en que hace quince años el huracán Katrina casi borró Nueva Orleans. Ida, nos dicen, parece ser el huracán más poderoso de los últimos 150 años, pero una cosa que sabemos ahora es que, si bien los huracanes solían ser un producto de las fuerzas de la naturaleza en el pasado, ahora también son los hijos bastardos del cambio climático provocado por el hombre. Algo muy parecido puede decirse de las pandemias, siendo el Covid-19 la prueba de los excesos que seguimos cometiendo en nuestro trato con los animales. Como si sus efectos asesinos no fueran suficientes, dieciocho meses después del inicio de la crisis en Wuhan, los científicos han confirmado ahora que estamos al borde de una extinción segura debido a los brutales patrones de cambio climático, a menos que hagamos algo urgentemente, cosa que no haremos. Tenía grandes esperanzas de que el Covid-19 cambiaría la forma en que las personas se comportan, convirtiéndonos en miembros de la comunidad más prudentes y solidarios. Sin embargo, las imágenes de estos días de miles de jóvenes borrachos actuando como bárbaros en las calles de Barcelona una vez se ha levantado el toque de queda muestran que algo fundamental está mal. No importa cuán pocos sean, estas personas y los antivacunas, y los negacionistas del virus—y las farmacéuticas codiciosas y los gobiernos obtusos— revelan que como especie somos suicidas. Esperar que la especie altere el camino del cambio climático cuando no podemos proteger a nuestros semejantes de un virus mortal es casi absurdo. Esto no es lo que somos.

Hay que agregar a todo esto la caída de Kabul ante los talibanes y el resurgimiento de ISIS en Afganistán. Debo confesar que he estado evitando las noticias

más detalladas que vienen de ese rincón del mundo y simplemente prestando atención básicamente a los titulares, tratando cobardemente de enterrar mi cabeza en la arena para fingir que el final de la guerra afgana no está conectado con mi mundo. Por supuesto, el encarcelamiento repentino de todas las mujeres afganas bajo la ley sharia nos afecta a todas, las mujeres que constituimos el 51% de la especie *Homo Sapiens* pero que vivimos como una minoría indefensa. La caída de Kabul no es en absoluto comparable a la conquista de Saigón en 1975 por los comunistas, que tan a menudo se ha comentado este verano. Al final, y a diferencia de lo que predicaba la doctrina del dominó tras la guerra de Vietnam, el comunismo no conquistó el mundo después de 1975. Mi profunda preocupación es que, en contraste, otros países seguirán la dictadura patriarcal ahora establecida en Kabul, con la pérdida no solo de los derechos de las mujeres afganas, sino también de todos los de todas las mujeres. No necesitas ser un fanático de *El cuento de la doncella* para entender que el futuro podría empeorar rápidamente hasta ser mucho más terrible que el pasado. Por otro lado, tanto Siria (ahora olvidada en las noticias) como Afganistán me hacen pensar en cómo los peores excesos pueden ocurrir a la luz del día y frente a la prensa internacional sin que nadie pueda detenerlos. Se necesitó una poderosa alianza para detener al ejército tenebroso de Hitler en 1945, pero la ONU y la OTAN no han podido detener a los mucho menos poderosos talibanes por una catastrófica falta de determinación (y, digámoslo, de eficiencia militar) que tendrá terribles consecuencias para las mujeres, las personas LGTBIQ+ y los hombres no patriarcales en todo el mundo. El terrorismo unirá fuerzas con el Covid-19 y el cambio climático para hacer que la vida humana en la Tierra sea aún peor de lo que ya es.

Trata de educar a los jóvenes en medio de todo esto para el futuro. Mi nueva asignatura para este curso es una optativa semestral sobre las mujeres en la música pop actual, una idea destinada a animarnos y que ahora me suena un poco irrelevante. Por supuesto, nunca se sabe en estos días lo que es realmente relevante*:* el torrente de lágrimas de Leo Messi en su conferencia de prensa de despedida en Barcelona parecía ser muy relevante para el estado de la masculinidad en estos días, pero quizás lo que es más relevante es lo rápido que le vimos sonreír una vez que el torrente de millones del París Saint-Germain cayó sobre su regazo. Pero me voy por las ramas. Los talibanes han prohibido toda la música en Afganistán, habiendo ejecutado ya a figuras clave como el cantante folclórico Fawad Andarabi. Analizar en este contexto el empoderamiento de las mujeres a través de sus carreras musicales es turbador. Incluso la aspirante a estrella más trivial adquiere una enorme importancia como figura de disidencia anti-patriarcal de un modo que nunca había considerado al diseñar el curso. Por otro lado, sospecho que una vez que escuchemos lo que las estrellas femeninas anglófonas actuales dicen en sus canciones, nos volveremos más escépticos sobre su empoderamiento. Como estamos aprendiendo en Kabul—y no tan lejos en las redes sociales locales—las mujeres siempre estamos a un paso de ser silenciadas, sin importar cuán alto hablamos. Mi intención en cualquier caso es compartir con mis alumn@s el placer de escuchar a las mujeres cantar en voz alta y hermosa, como tantas lo hacen. Iba a escribir 'tanto tiempo como podamos' pero tal vez eso sea contraproducente.

Quizás por la constante amenaza de ser cancelada por el patriarcado, en este verano de proporciones apocalípticas he encontrado mucho consuelo en las memorias de Katharine Graham, la mujer que fue propietaria y regentó *The Washington Post* durante décadas. De joven era fan de la serie de televisión *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), el spin-off de la popular sitcom *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) protagonizada por Ed Asner, el excelente actor fallecido ayer (también fue la voz del gruñón Carl Fredricksen en *Up!*). La jefa del gran periodista Grant en el ficticio *Los Angeles Tribune* era la formidable Margaret Jones Pynchon (interpretada por Nancy Marchand), un personaje compuesto, informa Wikipedia, fusionando "las ejecutivas periodísticas de la

vida real Dorothy Chandler de *Los Angeles Times* y Katharine Graham de *The Washington Post"*. Más tarde, me encontré con la propia Graham interpretada por Meryl Streep en la infravalorada *The Post* (2017) de Steven Spielberg, sobre la crisis causada cuando la administración Nixon intentó prohibir que todos los periódicos estadounidenses publicaran los Papeles del Pentágono filtrados por el indignado Daniel Ellsberg. En las memorias de Graham, el volumen ganador del premio Pulitzer *Personal History* (1997), este episodio es importante, pero la lección sobre cómo proteger la libertad de prensa que Katharine ofrece no es nada en comparación con sus enseñanzas sobre cuán marginales eran las mujeres en el periodismo cuando de repente se vio empoderada.

Básicamente, el patriarcal padre de Graham, Eugene Meyer, nunca pudo ver a su hija como su heredera en *The Post,* por lo que eligió a su yerno Phil Graham para desempeñar ese papel. Mientras Katharine vivía la ajetreada vida de la esposa de clase alta, madre y anfitriona de salón, Phil sucumbió a una espiral de auto-destrucción, dominado por el pensamiento de que no había tenido éxito por sus méritos, sino por ser el esposo de su esposa. Incapaz de lidiar con su propio machismo, Phil se quitó la vida, lo que dejó a una conmocionada Katharine al frente de *The Post* cuando menos lo esperaba, a los 46 años. Sus memorias son a menudo lectura dolorosa por la constante inseguridad que muestra en todo momento, incluso cuando era ya una de las mujeres más poderosas de la Tierra. La anciana Katharine (publicó las memorias cuatro años antes de su muerte en 2001, a los 84 años) narra su vida no como una mujer que fue feminista desde el principio, sino como una mujer que descubrió el feminismo una vez que se empoderó y que está horrorizada por su propia ingenuidad como mujer más joven. No podía ser de otra manera dados sus antecedentes y la época. Hay que anotar que Katharine heredó *The Post* en 1963, el año en que Betty Friedan inició el feminismo de la segunda ola con *The Feminine Mystique.* Los muchos comentarios de Graham sobre el hecho de que era la única mujer en su círculo profesional (y cómo esto constreñía los hábitos de socialización de sus compañeros masculinos, arruinando sus placeres sexistas) nos recuerdan lo solitaria que era su figura hace solo sesenta años. Muchas cosas han cambiado, pero no para las mujeres periodistas que ahora huyen de Afganistán (o están atrapadas allí).

Kabul y Katharine me han enseñado este verano, en resumen, que si vivir la vida de una mujer es ya suficientemente complicado, estar sometida a las fuerzas patriarcales de la historia hace que cualquier ilusión de control personal sea ingenua e incluso peligrosa. Francamente, no sé a dónde vamos como seres humanos, por lo que estoy seguro de que encontraré mucho consuelo en volver a enseñar Literatura Victoriana, ya que los victorianos tenían un claro sentido del progreso, incluidas las mujeres que inventaron el feminismo de la primera ola. Hubo un momento en la década de 1990 en que parecía que el *Homo Sapiens* podría tener la oportunidad de establecer una cultura global multicultural verdaderamente ilustrada, pero eso se reveló como una falsa impresión generada por los intereses de las corporaciones multinacionales, que celebraban por todo lo alto el fin del comunismo. Luego vino 9/11, la trágica llamada de atención a la verdadera naturaleza de la civilización (in)humana cuyo vigésimo aniversario ocurrirá en un par de semanas. Desde entonces, parecemos incapaces como colectividad de encontrar un nuevo horizonte sólido, un sentido de futuro, un proyecto para nosotros y nuestro planeta. No me importa en relación a mi vida, pero tengo jóvenes a los que educar, la mayoría de ellos mujeres, y me pregunto en voz alta cómo hacerlo con entusiasmo y esperanza para su futuro. Quedo a la escucha por si tienes alguna idea que compartir.