



# Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies



Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by  
Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

PADOVA  
**UP**

P A D O V A   U N I V E R S I T Y   P R E S S



Prima edizione 2021 Padova University Press

Titolo originale *Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies*

© 2021 Padova University Press  
Università degli Studi di Padova  
via 8 Febbraio 2, Padova  
www.padovauniversitypress.it

Progetto grafico: Padova University Press  
Impaginazione: Oltrepagina, Verona

ISBN 978-88-6938-257-4



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## INTRODUCTION

*Rocco Coronato and Marilena Parlati*

Getting out of the box is a way for innovative writers across the ages not simply to jettison their given cultural and national tools but to combine them inventively.<sup>1</sup> This book is driven by a concern for how changes in taste, genre, literary techniques can be figuratively conceived as the physical act of exiting a given environment of conventions. It aims to detect the many ways in which cultures negotiate their differences and eventually revise their boundaries: epistemological shifts are shown thanks to the changes in literary tastes and in conventions. In/out, the centre of the Empire and its (ex-)colonies, whiteness and blackness, man and woman, are among the main twin boxes that get revised and extrapolated. Not one single box is left untouched: fixed notions of genre, and of gender as well, are here discussed with a keen attention to the many moments where the writers' ambivalence causes a shift in literary creation.

Outsiderdom comes in many ways. One distinctive direction is the sense of cross-fertilization between different genres, which also proves how unsatisfactory periodizations can be. In their varied approaches, these essays share a beneficial resistance against the constraints of taxonomy: the instability of a literary code is shown to open up to new permutations whereby the writer's ethnic and gendered differences reshuffle all previous boxes. This book shows how revered critical terms such as the Gothic or Modernism are thus problematized and shown in their radical porosity. The notion of literary canon also beneficially suffers from the frequent leaps between different boxes: hybridization governs the formation of cultural and literary movements, as well as the personal careers of literary pioneers that love mixing different genres and media.

In some cases, this reshuffling out of the box is physically meant to refer to the act of bringing a text out of its original context, for instance by way of translation, or also to creatively adapt its original components and poetics in a strikingly different socio-cultural context imbibed with acts of transmediation. The cultural phenomena that this book explores

<sup>1</sup> This initial section, as well as sections 1 to 3, were written by Rocco Coronato. Marilena Parlati is the author of sections 4-6.

can be rendered in terms of movement across a cultural and intertextual space, across boundaries, off the margins. Perhaps the image that best binds together these essays is incorporation, showing how all these cultural and critical boxes are prised open and their elements are liberally included in new forms of literary poetics.

### 1. *A Long Nineteenth Century*

The first section analyses the shifting boundaries of many conventional definitions of genre and canonicity. Elena Cotta Ramusino ('Generic Instability: Gothic Fiction from an Irish Perspective in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century') tackles the mobility of the Gothic genre with its many examples of stable formulaic codification, showing how slippery its boundaries were, 'both always in excess (as something indefinable) and on the margins (as something repressed, frightening, and socially shocking)'. This exemplary instability is studied through the example of an interesting filiation of the genre, the Irish tradition that is usually made to stem from one of the foundational works of the Gothic, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Many Gothic works in fact came out before that date, fully showing one of the major dynamics of cultural change, the process of hybridization between the Gothic and the historical novel. Different forms, genres, and themes are blurred and mixed, and elements taken out of different cultural boxes co-exist in these mobile terms, often espousing the stylistic features of the genre with socio-cultural concerns, for instance the closeness between the Irish Gothic and the historical accounts of Catholic rebellions.

Places are often boxes that can be rearranged, both in larger terms as in the Irish Gothic, and in the wavy nature of the modern city. Greta Perletti ("The Stream of Life that Will Not Stop": The "Memory of Places" and the Palimpsestuous Streets of the Nineteenth-Century City") studies the spatiality of modern places and their *memoria loci* through the lens of a metaphor, the palimpsest, that gained wide acceptance in the course of the long century thanks to new technical discoveries that enabled the revelation of earlier inscriptions on parchment scrolls. Urban spaces are places of memory in two senses: they retain forceful memories that are disclosed simply by walking or being transported through them, and they are also vividly remembered by the *flâneur*. This twofold kind of memory magically held by urban places is thus revealed by writ-

ers exactly in terms of a palimpsest, an ambiguity that is preserved by the action of remembering and deciphering the memory held by places. Perletti proposes ‘to “think out of the box” by exploring the streets of the nineteenth-century city as a prime example of the *loci*’s propensity to haunt humans and to unsettle the agency we would expect to be at work in the mnemonic process’. She shows the connections between the city and mnemonic imagination first with a foray into the classical and early modern art of memory and then by setting it in the context of nineteenth-century palimpsest decoding techniques, ‘when the palimpsest began to be used as a metaphor for the human mind, transforming the encounter with the memory of places in the city in an experience entailing a possibly pathological process’. This nineteenth-century fascination for the palimpsestuous emergence of memories is then probed by exploring how the Victorian mnemonic vestigia surface in two more recent works, Geoffrey Fletcher’s *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand’s photographic series *Gone Astray Portraits* (2002-3).

A different way of getting out of the box is translation and the novel ways in which literary tradition is literally brought out of its original context. Andrew Brayley’s essay (‘Shelley and Dante: Translation and Adaptation’) studies how Shelley creatively translates and adapts a passage of the *Purgatorio* (28.1-51) where Dante describes the vision of a lady gathering flowers. Brayley recreates the complex network of influences that Shelley wove together by connecting Dante, *Matilda* (a short novel by Mary Shelley), and several Miltonic influences. The adaptation of a classical text is thus incorporated by Shelley into his poetic vision by enhancing the element of obscurity and threat in a hybridizing connection with the classical myth of Proserpine and the theme of motherhood.

The translation and adaptation of the classical tradition, though later in the century and with an emphasis on gendered differences, return in Maria Luigia Di Nisio’s piece (“A woman’s heart, with manly counsel fraught”: A. Mary F. Robinson, Greek Tragedy and Poetry in *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881’). *The Crowned Hippolytus* is a remarkable example of Robinson’s appropriation of Greek language, thought, and culture, as well as a turning point in her rephrasing her role as a woman of letters that tried to combine the task of translation with poetical effort. Placing Robinson’s work within the context of Victorian Hellenism and the gradual rise of female academic access to the study of the ancient world despite many redoubtable social constraints, the work captures

the many ways in which Robinson's pioneering adaptation of Euripides gets out of all these cultural and social boxes in a period increasingly marked by the rise of the aesthetic movement. Getting out of the box also means reappraising the canon: '*The Crowned Hippolytus* testifies to Robinson's embodied desire and active commitment to the ancient classics, in an unresolved tension between ambition and modesty, knowing and not-knowing, and always on the margins of scholarly knowledge'.

Gendered differences also surface in the essay by Daniela Francesca Viridis and Gabriella Milia ('Exploring Feminized Landscapes in Victorian Erotica: Ecocriticism Meets Sociology'), dealing with a subgenre, the fiction published on late Victorian licentious magazines such as *The Pearl*, *A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (1879-1881), in particular a novel entitled *Sub-Umbra: under the shade of trees*, 'a practice of feminization and sexualization of the physical environment' does emerge. The salience of the countryside, read in ecocritical terms, enables the two authors to detect 'the primary interests of feminist cultural geography: the association of the natural with the female and sexual pleasure, the metaphors of feminine nature as opposed to masculine culture, the visual and written encodings of feminine nature'. By comparing it to works such as *King Solomon's Mines*, they show how *Sub-Umbra* recombines the box of hegemonic manliness by describing the physical environment 'less as an object of domination or exploitation than as a sexual accomplice and partner ready to encourage and offer gratification [...] sexuality is figuratively connected to the physical environment'.

The last chapter of the first section, Francesca Guidotti's 'Mashing up Jane Austen's Classics: *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* & *Mansfield Park* and *Mummies*', also considers the two intertwined topics of gendered differences and adaptation of canonical texts. In the long afterlife of *Pride and Prejudice*, a recent striking occurrence was Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), a mash-up novel. Mash-up stands for 'the blending of two or more sources into a newly conceived and partly self-standing object', a transmedial practice now widely diffused that is however brought back by Guidotti to classical and early modern examples of mixing between old and new media. Guidotti argues that Austen's novel already obliquely enshrined some elements of monstrosity that the mash-up brings consciously to the light: 'Present-day readers may not be able to identify what is lacking in Austen's novels but are, nevertheless, intuitively aware of the presence of some textual gaps and,

in most cases, ready to welcome new hole-filling inclusions', such as the references to the Gothic elements that would surface in *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*, and the many muted omissions of contemporary history and its carnages. The mash-up novel brings these elements out of the unconscious box and explicitly stages them also by addressing the question of female independence, 'with new bodily and vital connotations: women are healthy, lively, energetic precisely in so far as they lack a class-defining status'.

## 2. *Towards a Definition of Modernism*

Section 2 explicitly deals with the porous quality of Modernism. Debora A. Sarnelli ('Crossing the Great Divide: The Golden Age of Detective Fiction as Lowbrow Modernism') ponders the usual critical divide between high Modernism and popular culture by testing how these boundaries might in fact have been more slippery than expected. Sarnelli especially focuses on these blurring conditions by analysing Agatha Christie's interwar novels. Christie's new style of detective fiction parted ways from canonical detective tradition and offered many elements that recalled the Modernist practice, 'a longer plot with a subplot, multiple suspects, a domestic setting and a new type of detective', as well as the use of irony, comedy, narrative unreliability, multiple perspectives and gaps. Some Modernist traits of the anti-hero can also be spotted in Christie's vulnerable detectives, thanks to the buffoonish Poirot's femininity and Miss Marple's social marginalization and reliance on gossip. The novels also betray Modernist signs of uncertainty, in a joint nostalgic look at the cohesive, relatable self of the past and the recognition of interwar precariousness.

The hidden negotiation between High Modernism and popular culture returns in Annalisa Federici's essay ('Was She Really a Snob? Virginia Woolf, the "Battle of the Brows" and Popular Print Culture'). Considering the intersections between Modernism and mass culture by testing the case of Virginia Woolf's collaboration with popular magazines such as the British *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, Federici reassesses the negotiations between the two poles and acknowledges the existence of multiple, ambivalent relations between the Modernist writer and the marketplace. The implication goes both ways: while non-fictional essays resort to Modernist techniques, fictional works



heavily rely on such descriptions of the pulsating urban landscape, pointing in both cases to the description of the narrator's/observer's mind: 'their appearance in popular periodicals created a complex interplay between high modernist aesthetics and decadent, "throwaway" consumer culture', adding to the 'portrayal of a multifaceted artist who never lowered her high aesthetic standards'.

Ester Gendusa's contribution ('Questioning the Canon and Re-writing/Re-righting the Female Colonized Subject: Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* and George B. Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*') juxtaposes two different critiques of renditions of the theme of the hegemonic representations of the female colonial Other, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* (1857), and George Bernard Shaw's 1932 prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*. The box out of which the two works emerge by sharing a comparable 'oppositional aesthetics' is racial difference, seen in two starkly different phases of British imperialism. Travel writing is commonly associated with identity self-fashioning: Gendusa here considers how the two works deal with 'the intertwined analytic categories of gender and "race"' and 'contribute to deconstructing traditional conceptions of the white/black divide'. The two forms of dualism, man/woman, white/black, are interwoven by letting blackness undermine any Manichean polarizations. With her two mixed identities as a British subject and a Jamaican Creole, the protagonist of Seacole's work compounds all notions of identity and belongingness, with a sense of plurality that also rests on the stylistic mix between travel account and biography. In-betweenness is thus yet another form of outsiderdom, deconstructing both cultures and genders with a complex mix of admiration and resistance. Shaw's cultural hybridity is informed by a different condition of marginality on the author's part, hailing from Ireland and testifying to the influence of Modernist technique such as the multiplicity of time levels and voices. Otherness also impairs European notions of normativity, resisting the association between blackness and nature.

The last chapter of the section on Modernism, Monica Manzollilo's 'Back into the Box: T.S. Eliot's Preface to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', analyses the hitherto unexplored ambiguities surrounding T.S. Eliot's editorial practice while accepting Barnes's masterpiece for publication. In his introduction to the novel, Eliot falls short of praising *Nightwood* for its utter originality and instead resorts to the language of criticism

by underlining the hardly self-evident similarity between Barnes and Elizabethan tragedy. Manzollilo explores the several ways in which Eliot deliberately omits to consider the novel's merits and instead praises the poetic language of the American writer, as yet another manifestation of his own ideal of the literary genius secluded in an ivory tower: 'for him it was more useful to delete this section and limit *Nightwood* to the portrayal of a spiritual crisis he knew very well of [...] which was more suitable to the economy of his literary and editorial views'.

### 3. *An Experiment in Dialogue: H.I.E. Dhlomo Across Genres*'

The third section is wholly devoted to the fascinating example of an author that recombined all gender, generic, ethnic boxes, the South African writer Herbert Dhlomo, who dwelt on multiple thresholds, between the colonial world and the United Kingdom, literature and politics, fiction and journalism. Giuliana Iannaccaro ('The Teacher and the Bard: Herbert Dhlomo's Historical Drama') studies how Dhlomo combined his joint knowledge of Western literary models and indigenous dramatic forms with his belief in the ultimate instructive power of literature, especially drama. Blending styles and traditions from both boxes, in his 'syncretic project of attempting to fuse the best of African and European artistic traditions, the young writer saw himself as the prophet of a new cultural awakening, as well as the "bard" of the developing South African nation'. Getting out of the box often implies some driving social intent on the writer's part, and that especially applies to Dhlomo's pedagogic didacticism for the benefit of South African citizens. Iannaccaro analyses how Dhlomo draws on the European literary canon 'to instruct and enchant his readers', as well as to show how European historical events and political and cultural practices could be decoded through the instructive medium of drama. In an ambivalent pose, Dhlomo adopts both the role of the 'proficient pupil' who exploits his education and of the 'ungrateful and dangerously radicalized "native"' who aspires to being a leader for his country's moral conscience.

*Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941), Dhlomo's arguably most famous poetic work, is the focus of Marco Canani's article ('Romantic Polyphony in Herbert I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills*'). Hailed as a masterpiece of African epic poetry, the poem was praised also for its evident political merits as a contribution to the shaping of a modern national spirit.

Getting out of the box is here coupled with genre experimentation: the poem is based on a masterly polyphonic interweaving of different genres that resembles the texture of *The Waste Land*, and in inspiration it largely draws on Dhlomo's conflation of British Romantic voices. Examining the circulation of British Romantic poetry among 1930s-40s New African intellectuals, Canani argues that the driving inspiration heavily stemmed from Dhlomo's inventive appropriation of Shelley's reformist and stylistic ideals in the light of his 'belief in the role of music in creating an absolute language that may defy the constraints of verbal discourse', while Keats seemed to influence the South African writer with his faith in the 'epistemic value of suffering': this 'imbrication of genres, voices, and allusions leaves textual scars which, despite causing multiple narrative fractures, produce a polyphonic effect that documents Dhlomo's tormented attempt at negotiating between cultures at a literary and political level'.

The study of Dhlomo's short fiction, so far the object of scanty critical attention, informs the two chapters by Sara Sullam ('An Experiment in Reading: Narrative Composition in H.I.E. Dhlomo's Short Fiction') and Marta Fossati ('Literariness and Genre Mobility: Journalistic Features in the Short Stories by Herbert Dhlomo'). Sullam investigates the extent to which the Modernist tag can make sense of Dhlomo's short stories: while clearly showing several elements of melodrama, the stories also draw on some 'narrative dissonances', those narrative techniques that are usually inscribed into Modernist practice and that 'illuminate the tension between the didactic aims that characterize Dhlomo's fiction and the challenges of modernization'. Sullam considers a few revealing practices, for instance the way in which 'the omniscient narrator is challenged by the discourse of a female character in the form of free indirect speech [...] The tension between a melodramatic narrative revolving, once again, around incest, and a narrative composition that, instead, enhances a plurality of points of view'. Working with both the native and European boxes, Dhlomo thus shows a 'controversial and contradictory implied author' that offers an interaction 'between (i) a plot built on the elements of the cheap melodramatic novelette (recognition, incest), (ii) a narrator who, with his broad and authoritative generalizations, patronizingly counterbalances the melodramatic mode of the stories, and (iii) the emergence of a different discourse, from both a narrative and an ideological point of view, through the use of specific narrative techniques traditionally associated with modernist writing'.

Fossati probes the salience of Dhlomo's short stories by comparing them with yet another important dimension of his output, journalism. One of the problems surrounding these stories, which remained mostly unpublished, is also what makes them especially rewarding in terms of outsiderdom: the indeterminacy of their genre, veering between actual journalism in disguise and fiction with a social and informative intent. The stories also show again that getting out of the box is often driven by a stringent desire to propose a different societal view. Shifting between genres in his mixture of reporting and fictionalization, Dhlomo voices potentially dangerous ideas such as the portrait of the plight of rural blacks and his rejection of tribalism, ticking both the colonial and the native boxes with distinctive force.

#### 4. *Intermediation*

The papers included in the section on 'Intermediation' all deal with some of the many intricacies of multimedia and multimodal crossings. In his 'Questioning Definitions: The Challenge of Rhythm Analysis', Andrea Fenice sounds the possibilities and predicaments of Gérard Genette's and Mieke Bal's takes on narrative rhythm and the relevance of speed and pace in narrative discourse. By suggesting the possibilities inherent in the concept of 'textual relief' and in the complementarity between tension and rhythm recently suggested by Daniele Barbieri, and by also referring to semiotic approaches which insist on the cognitive and affective responses narrative can trigger and deploy, Fenice approaches the 2016 BBC adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. He reads the novel as informed by 'an altered temporal exposition' by which Conrad managed to put to the fore or hide some elements of the plot; in his view, while it remains 'faithful' to the novel, the film adaptation he focusses on underplays the articulate rhythmic structure of Conrad's work in favour of short-term devices of a more conventional mould.

Emanuela Ammendola's contribution to this section, 'AVT: Britishness in *Paddington*', investigates via a set of multimodal lenses a very well-known British animated film and its Italian version. By analysing some of the cultural premises already extant in the original version, in particular its self-conscious parodied sense of 'Britishness', Ammendola follows the dubbing strategies which mark the rendition of the 'humour, stereotypes and culture-bound elements' of that alleged national

belonging. Both in the dubbing and in the audiovisual channelling of the film, she posits, the self-conscious satire of the source is partially lost. In Ammendola's view, in the Italian adaptation a few cultural referents are left unnoticed, and instead of embracing the same ironical stance as the source, it also reinforces some of the stereotypes *Paddington* had visibly attempted to undermine.

In his 'From *Velvet Goldmine* to *The Happy Prince*: Portraying Oscar Wilde's Outsideness in Contemporary Cinema', Pierpaolo Martino sets out on a journey along some of the routes Oscar Wilde, as a multifaceted global pop icon, continues to take in contemporary culture. More specifically, he attends to the many reverberations which have remarkably reassessed Wilde's position in and out of many canons since the explosion of glam culture in the 1970s, renewed and triggered by the numerous cultural events that celebrated him in the 1990s. For Martino, *Velvet Goldmine* highlighted 'Wilde's outsideness, in relation to Victorian culture, rewriting him as a postmodern icon and as the first pop idol of British history'. More widely, the very phenomenon of glam is read as a complex articulation of masked identities, of ironical performances and transvestitism which was still vibrant in the very famous *Wilde* starring Stephen Fry. The second film explored in depth in this paper is Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*, which depicts a post-trial, derelict and lonely Wilde, dying out like the gilded statue of the fairy tale whose title the film bears.

Luisa Marino contributes to this section by looking not only out of the box, but *at* the box itself, in her 'Dis-Covered. Book Covers and the Representation of Female Narratives in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists*'. Her paper surveys book covers as paratextual apparatuses, which foster and orient the reception and consumption of cultural texts, and work as forms of translation in their own terms. In her view, 'book covers anticipate the access to the verbal text providing readers with the first instruments to interpret it'. Her chosen examples are a very famous novel and a talk, later published in a short-essay form, given by the globally known writer, intellectual, activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose iconic perambulations Marino follows from Nigeria to the US, and later to Italy, Portugal and Brazil. The status of celebrity attached to Adichie and reinforced by the amazing popularity surrounding her 2012 talk *We Should All Be Feminists* directs the book format the last has taken. In both cases, Marino analyses what Genette

defines as the ‘epitextual’ and ‘peritextual’ circulations and crisscrossings in and out of the materiality of books, markets, and cultures.

The many predicaments inherent in multicode translation are at stake in Eleonora Sasso’s ‘Trespassing Cultural Boundaries in Audiovisual Media: Aboriginal Female Discourse and Cultural Heritage in *Maina*’. She suggests that the very act of subtitling, in the case of recent non-mainstream, non-majority films in the Canadian multilingual panorama, is a perfect example of a ‘multimodal and interlingual form of discourse’, entailing ‘thinking out of the box, including minority cultures, becoming aware of the existence of alien communities’. Sasso investigates *Maina. An Unusual Love Story*, ‘a multilingual film shot in Innu and Inuit, with English subtitles and English voice-over narration’. In her view, the film manages to convey the richness of First Nations cultures and languages, without flattening or framing them within mainstream and colonial coding confines. Sasso reads subtitles as the ‘outside’ of the film box, and is intent on applying cognitive science in order to read through the subtitling strategies adopted in *Maina*.

### 5. *Bodies*

In the section on ‘Bodies’, papers focus on revisiting embodiment, and take ‘the body’ as their intended, fluctuating, and impassable ‘object’ of study. Anna Anselmo contributes a paper on ‘Reconfiguring the Dead Body. Shapes of the After-life in Gunther von Hagens and Seamus Heaney’. In this case, the box is the body *itself*, in its engaging materialities, in its revisiting the confines between subject and object, and in some of the recent investigations and artistic practices sounding the porous boundaries between life and death. Anselmo uses Deleuze’s concept of *devenir* to read through *Body Worlds*, the globally renowned and radically innovative anatomical exhibition format devised by von Hagens, and also some ‘bog poems’ by Seamus Heaney. In the first instance, Anselmo suggests among other things that ‘the cadaver is no longer an ontological fact antipodal to a living body, but an exhibit that has undergone several stages of remediation, therefore a category all unto itself’. Her discourse later highlights the phenomenal status of bog bodies, another famous instance of the ontological and temporal disruption of seemingly secure boundaries: she concludes that ‘Heaney captures the symbolic essence of these bodies, their being in-between: they are caught in becoming, a pure event, a simultaneity’.

Maria Luisa De Rinaldis also investigates the in-between status of the human body, in her 'Skulls: from Aids to Meditation to Fashion Accessories', with the declared intention of thinking outside the box. She adopts 'an intermedial perspective' and thus sets out to 'trace a trajectory of the image from its use in the Renaissance to remediations in fiction and fashion'. Thus, De Rinaldis carefully interrogates the boundary between representation and materiality in the many centuries she surveys with examples which prove to what extent modern and contemporary Western culture has been obsessed by human remains, more in particular by the skull, metonymical subject/object *par excellence*. From emblem books to the Renaissance stage, from Victoriana to Pater, from Virginia Woolf to contemporary fashion visual discourse she follows the twists and turns of skulls in their being – and being read, seen and marketed as – meaningfully beyond boundaries.

Emilio Amideo's paper on 'Rethinking the Human: The Use of Animal Metaphors to Language the Utopianism of the Black Queer Existence' attempts a reading of some of the innumerable ways in which 'power relations are expressed in and naturalized through language [in] the process of metaphorization'. Amideo clarifies that metaphors, even and more specifically those 'we live by', are never neutral, rather, they have often been devised and used to marginalize and degrade non-dominant groups, in the cases studied here with a specific focus on animalization in relation to black queer experience. He starts by analysing the concept of 'parahumanity', and later moves on to explore 'Shell', a short story by the Scottish writer Jackie Kay. In Amideo's view, Kay manages to assert the relevance of afro-fabulation and write against the grain of a disempowering metaphorical tradition; in 'Shell', Kay 'recovers the trope of the animalization of both black Africans and women in Western culture and rewrites it in order to create an alternative reality'. If language can be and has been a stricture, rewriting often naturalized and made invisible stereotypes may help dismantling it, and thus work to 'deviate from commonly known forms of embodiment pertaining to contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy'.

## 6. Contemporary Challenges

The three essays included in the section on 'Contemporary Challenges' also work against the grain of heteronormativity and canonical reading

in elucidating a few very recent works on embodiment, relationality and excruciatingly topical geopolitics. Maria Grazia Nicolosi contributes to this composite volume with “She lives now in two worlds”: Re-placing the Embodied Other in Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child*. Her theoretical framework is founded on theories on orientation (Ahmed) and practices of vulnerability on the part of an author, Phillips, who has often dedicated his works to rewriting and revisiting the British canon in order to make visible and audible the other voices and embodied others obliterated, silenced, mutilated and murdered by a far too long history of colonial epistemic violence. For Nicolosi, *The Lost Child* materializes onto this recursive inheritance of “loss” the violence that lurks between the (un)written lines of the British (post-)colonial and (post-)imperial imagination’. In her reading of *The Lost Child*, only tangentially a reappropriation of *Wuthering Heights*, she crosses Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological take on embodiment as ‘open wound’ with Butler’s thoughts on multivocal and cross-temporal proximate vulnerability and concludes that Phillips manages to achieve his project, ‘the re-clamation of place and the re-possession of voice by those embodied others whose involvement in the world has been most inhumanly called into crisis’.

In her ‘Walking a Thin Gender Line: Transgender Identity and Gender Fluidity in MacCabe’s *Breakfast on Pluto*’, Carla Tempestoso captures an instance of literature intrinsically rooted in ‘contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization’. In her analysis of the audacious and iconoclastic *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), she also adopts the frame of ‘becoming’ – which fosters a clearer understanding of the ‘complex and processual nature of identity formation’ – to peruse the multiple means by which the novel puts to the fore transgenderism, namely in MacCabe’s choice of a protagonist moving ‘across, between, or beyond the binary categories of male and female’ and breaking ‘through each layer of the enforced gender segregation by putting them in the shoes of the oppressed’.

Our last essay in the volume is Maria Elena Capitani’s ‘A Tale of Two Countries: the Shadow of Brexit in Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) and Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land* (2017)’. Her analysis is rooted in Derrida’s 1992 exploration of European identity and possible futurities, where the philosopher insisted that ‘for Europe to continue to exist, it needs to embrace its own internal contradictions and aporias’, including accepting its being an ‘over-colonized European hybrid’. Capitani argues that



Brexit and the evergrowing BrexLit which is coming to terms with its cultural (and ideological, political, financial) consequences can work both to build walls *and* cross them, especially when it comes to linguistic inventiveness. Her special attention goes to Ali Smith's *Autumn* and to Amanda Craig's satirical *The Lie of the Land*. Capitani maintains that 'both novels investigate the fissures of an inevitably fractured, gloomy, and disconnected Britain, in which Remainers and Leavers, cosmopolitanism and insularity, urban landscapes and the English countryside, immigrants and native people, future scenarios and nostalgia for the imperial past violently clash'.

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This volume of essays is born of a very successful conference which was held in September 2019 under the aegis of AIA, the Italian Association for English Studies. The editors were, at the time, also part of the organizing committee of the conference, and are deeply indebted to all the other members, especially to our colleagues of English Language studies, who are publishing a parallel volume with the proceedings relating to their area of research.

Heartfelt thanks are due to the Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari of the Università degli Studi di Padova, our graceful hosts. The generosity of the Director, prof. Sergio Bozzola, allowed us to have the whole conference in one building, thus greatly enhancing the ongoing dialogue and exchange which is such an important part of these events, and we were warmly supported by our colleagues and by the administrative and technical staff of the department. Dr Camilla Caporicci, of the same department, organized a young scholars' seminar which opened the conference and allowed a fruitful interchange among the younger members of our community, and greatly enhanced the value of our meeting. We would also like to thank all our friends in the scientific committee, who spent hours selecting the papers with us and helping us with giving shape to the conference first, and then to this book. Many thanks to the innumerable anonymous reviewers, who performed the essential task of assessing the submissions and greatly contributed to their improvement. And lastly, thank you all, the authors of the various chapters of this book, for your work, and for the patience and good humour with which you have borne our innumerable requests.



II.  
TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MODERNISM



QUESTIONING THE CANON AND RE-WRITING/RE-RIGHTING  
THE FEMALE COLONIZED SUBJECT: MARY SEACOLE'S  
WONDERFUL ADVENTURES AND GEORGE B. SHAW'S  
THE ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK GIRL IN HER SEARCH  
FOR GOD

*Ester Gendusa*

Albeit different in terms of formal solutions and conception, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* (1857) and G.B. Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932) share an oppositional aesthetics which, in both cases, helps undermine any prevailing representation of the colonial Other. Indeed, Seacole's and Shaw's works manipulate the trope of travel in such a way as to overcome traditional conceptions of the literary canon as well as hegemonic visions of subjectivities. In *Wonderful Adventures* Seacole's recasting of the trope of travel becomes instrumental in delineating a transnational view of literature, which, in turn, becomes the vehicle for a renewed female black subject, able to converse with different cultural contexts, such as the British and the Crimean one. Less than a century later, in 1932, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw published his prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, which testified to the revolution represented by Modernism due to its being a real watershed in terms of forms and thematic motifs. In the story, the leading character, a mission-educated young black woman, sets off for a voyage across the forest in order to find God. The journey becomes the occasion for the girl to speculate on both religious and philosophical issues and, simultaneously, to openly attack the Edwardian colonial paradigm. This is primarily because in the story, in the context of an irony-pervaded reconfiguration of identity models, the 'farthest' pole of the white/black binary couple is de-homogenized, de-pathologized and given something more than a voice: a speculative faculty. It is my contention that Seacole's and Shaw's works are to be seen as oppositional literary products in which a renewed trope of travel, together with genre porosity, helps deconstruct Western hegemonic value systems and interrupt circuits of 'racialized' knowledge, thus creating symbolic possibilities of political transformation. Indeed, deconstructing the traditional racist association of Blackness with corporality and morally connoted deviance, Seacole and Shaw activate an imaginative reconfiguration of both ethnic difference and British identity whereby the colonial Other *par excellence* – the black woman – is almost re-cast into a New Woman.

*Mary Seacole; G.B. Shaw; Black New Woman; (Trans)national British Identity; Genre Permeability*

Albeit different in terms of authorial conception and formal solutions, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures*, published in 1857, and George Bernard Shaw's 1932 prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* share an oppositional aesthetics which helps undermine hegemonic representations of the female colonial (read: colonized) Other. Indeed, Seacole's and Shaw's works – written in two different phases of British imperialism – manipulate the trope of travel in such a way as to overcome contemporary prevailing visions of racial difference.<sup>1</sup> This essay thus aims to investigate the productive interplay between the odeporic formal solution and the thematic motif of identity self-fashioning in both texts, contextualizing it in the light of theoretical perspectives elaborated within gender and (post-)colonial studies. Drawing on the intertwined analytic categories of gender and 'race', it shall also explore the ways in which the two works – authored by two writers originally coming from the 'peripheries' of the empire – contribute to deconstructing traditional conceptions of the white/black divide.<sup>2</sup>

*Wonderful Adventures* was written three years after Seacole had been in the Crimean war,<sup>3</sup> serving as a pioneering mixed-race nurse both in the British Hotel she had opened in Balaclava and on the battlefields. The work recasts the trope of travel through a literary operation which becomes instrumental in delineating, within British odeporic literature, a multi-layered 'transnational turn' whose beginning can be traced back to the second half of the eighteenth century. Suffice it to think of Ignatius Sancho's epistolary work as well as Olaudah Equiano's and Mary Prince's autobiographical slave narratives, to name only a few.<sup>4</sup> These authors had

<sup>1</sup> The present essay is part of a larger project on Shaw's tale: a critical edition including a revised Italian translation of the work.

<sup>2</sup> That Ireland, Shaw's native country, played a complex role within the British Empire and that, for this reason, it cannot be straightforwardly assimilated to a sister kingdom with respect to England is a much debated question among historians. A large number of scholars agree on its ambiguous political positioning during the imperial era. For a recent comprehensive study, see Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The Crimean War was fought from 1853 to 1856. The main reason why England took part in the war was to limit Russia's influence in Eastern Europe as well as in the Asian continent so that it could not jeopardize British power in India.

<sup>4</sup> Ignatius Sancho (1729?-80) was born to slave parents on a ship transporting slaves in the context of the Middle Passage. After being sold by his initial owner, he lived most of his life in London, where, thanks to the Montagu family's help, he achieved a highly respectable social status and greatly influenced the British abolitionist cause. He is the author of a correspondence published posthumously, *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782). Olaudah Equiano (1745?-97), a former slave of Nigerian origins, supported the abolitionist movement too and wrote *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*

a wide cultural influence, not limited to the literary field: Sergio Guerra identifies them with the first ‘*black intellectuals*’ who lived in England.<sup>5</sup>

As a development of those early examples of Black British literature,<sup>6</sup> Seacole’s *Adventures* problematizes and even interrupts the prevailing representational circuits of nineteenth-century white British writers’ travel narrative. Travel writing itself is a complex literary category which often resists simplistic classifications. This is even more so in the case of women’s travel accounts for their multi-layered transgressing of conventions and distinguishing emphasis on transcultural relationships. One of the reasons for this specificity resides in nineteenth-century women’s peculiar attitude to travel. As Susan Bassnett suggests, ‘women travellers are therefore categorised as doubly different: they differ from other, more orthodox, socially conformist women, and from male travellers who use the journey as a means of discovering more about their own masculinity’.<sup>7</sup>

Seacole’s work, in particular, becomes the vehicle for a renewed model of the female traveller, as she delineates an autobiographical black female subject able to interact successfully with different cultural contexts, such as the Creole, the British and the Crimean. Far from being symbolically located within the axis of Nature and metonymically confined to the colonial territory, black subjectivity dismantles the Manichaean categori-

(1789), considered one of the first accounts of the complex trajectory from slavery to freedom to be published in England. Finally, Mary Prince (1788-1833), an abolitionist herself, born into slavery in Bermuda, is known as the author of the *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831), the first autobiography by a black woman in England.

<sup>5</sup> Sergio Guerra, *Figli della diaspora* (Fano: Aras, 2014), p. 23 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>6</sup> At the inception of the twenty-first century, seminal critical publications, mainly published in Great Britain, have contributed to casting light onto a tradition of literary works falling under the label of ‘Black British literature’. However divisive and problematic the phrase ‘Black British’ may be, works such as Lyn Innes’s *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (2002), Mark Stein’s *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), *A Black British Canon?* (2006), edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, and *‘Black’ British Aesthetics Today* (2007), edited by R. Victoria Arana, have helped delineate a multi-faceted and varied literary output by British writers with African, Asian and Caribbean origins. Although their thematic preoccupations and formal strategies may be extremely varied, it is undeniable that they all aim to transform the representation of British identity in terms of plurality. Against this backdrop the adjective ‘Black’ comes to be generally appropriated as a political signifier of cultural resistance to forms of marginalization and under-representation within mainstream circuits. In addition to the publications mentioned above, including Guerra (2015), for an overview of the major phases in the development of Black British literature see my *Identità nere e cultura europea. La narrativa di Bernardine Evaristo* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), especially chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bassnett, ‘Travel Writing and Gender’, in *A Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 226.



zation of the racial Other thanks to multiple displacements and cultural interactions. To this we may add the mixedness of the protagonist, which further complicates received notions of identity and national belongingness. The deriving sense of plurality is paralleled, on the formal level, by a narrative frame marked by genre permeability due to Seacole's travel accounts being interspersed with biographical references.

In the text, from its very inception, it is possible to trace Seacole's complex enactment of her belongingness to both the British community and the Jamaican Creole. In the opening chapter she locates herself within a highly productive space of identity in-betweenness which proves to be conversant with multiple cultures. Lorraine Mercer highlights her composite identity positioning when she argues that Seacole's 'narrative illustrates the position of a colonial subject placed in the challenging situation of both admiring and deconstructing white and colonial culture simultaneously'.<sup>8</sup> While she seems not to reject the race-biased stereotypes elaborated within Western hegemonic discourses with the aim of producing an inferiorizing image of the Other, Seacole assertively lays claim to her mixedness:

I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins. My father was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life, and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call 'the pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war'. Many people have also traced to my Scotch blood that energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race, and which have carried me to so many varied scenes; and perhaps they are right. I have often heard the term 'lazy Creole' applied to my country people; but I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent.<sup>9</sup>

The cultural process whereby the narrative persona activates the self-appropriation of her ethnic in-betweenness interweaves with Seacole's representation of an innovative genealogy with respect to traditional family models. In rejecting the racist association between indolence and the Creole group, she moulds her self-image by tracing an intimate connection with her Scottish father. As a consequence, her work counteracts dominant stereotyped representational processes of the period mainly surfacing from pseudo-scientific discourses as well as from literature.

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine Mercer, 'I Shall Make No Excuse: The Narrative Odyssey of Mary Seacole,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35, 1 (2005): p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (London: James Blackwood, 1857), p. 1. From now on, the page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

Here, mixedness, primarily traceable along the female genealogical line, is closely associated with racial weakness and degeneration. Sander L. Gilman, referring to the culturally constructed notion of miscegenation, maintains that 'miscegenation was a fear (and a word) from the late nineteenth-century vocabulary of sexuality. It was a fear not merely of interracial sexuality but of its results, the decline of the population'.<sup>10</sup>

In deliberately recuperating, within the textual space, a father/daughter emotional bond across the racial divide as well as the cultural legacy it entails, Seacole deconstructs the unbalanced power relations of the man/woman binary couple as elaborated in nineteenth-century patriarchal Britain. In so doing, she lays the foundations for the dismantling of the discursive association between blackness and inferiority. A connection that, in the wake of the colonial encounter, had been clearly modelled on the paradigm of connotative meanings coalescing around the man/woman dichotomy, as Anne McClintock suggests in her seminal *Imperial Leather* (1995):

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the analogy between race and gender degeneration came to serve a specifically modern form of social domination, as an intricate dialectic emerged – between the domestication of the colonies and the racializing of the metropolis. In the metropolis the idea of racial deviance was evoked to police the 'degenerate' classes – the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane – who were collectively figured as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern metropolis. In the colonies, black people were figured among other things as gender deviants, the embodiment of prehistoric promiscuity and excess, their evolutionary belatedness evidenced by their 'feminine' lack of history, reason and proper domestic arrangements.<sup>11</sup>

A plethora of examples pervaded by the deriving dualisms man/woman and white/black – often inextricably interconnected – can be found in cultural contexts in which Victorian hegemonic discourses were produced. The inferiorization of womanhood and of female blackness in particular was so pervasive that it ended up informing even cultural products which, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, aimed at redefining stereotyped notions of female identity. Cases in point are

<sup>10</sup> Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1 (1985): p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 44-5.

Charlotte Brontë's semiautobiographical *Jane Eyre* (1847) and, in the artistic field, *Ophelia*, John Everett Millais's much-celebrated 1851 painting. In both works the thematic undertone of mental insanity is deeply connected with femininity.<sup>12</sup>

Going back to Seacole's work, it is useful to notice that the politics of location entailed in her initial self-fashioning and further developed throughout the narrative also implies an imaginative deconstruction of the traditional race-biased model of the colonized woman. In tracing her cultural belongingness, Seacole casts light on her mother's medical competence, as can be inferred from the following excerpt:

My mother kept a boarding-house in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed at Kingston. It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me (p. 2).

What is important to emphasize here is that the medical knowledge and the socially acknowledged practice of which Seacole is depositary are handed down in the context of the matrilineal bond. The resulting female line of cultural transmission acquires oppositional traits with respect to the Western official custom of handing knowledge down to one's students in male-dominated contexts, which came into being in the aftermath of the institutionalization of the medical field.

As the narrative unfolds, the autobiographical events Seacole singles out amid her multiple displacements become the occasion for the author to reflect on the 'Creole character' in such a way as to valorise an axiological system as well as behavioural traits other than the dominant ones:

I do not think that we hot-blooded Creoles sorrow less for showing it so impetuously; but I do think that the sharp edge of our grief wears down sooner than theirs who preserve an outward demeanour of calmness, and nurse their woe secretly in their hearts (p. 6).

<sup>12</sup> In Brontë's novel, in particular, madness is seen as the result of the biological weakening of the white group following the sexual encounter with the black in the colonial space. Here, the white Creole Bertha Mason typifies black women's supposedly inherent weakness and its transmission along the female family line. As for Millais's painting, its recuperation of the Shakespearean character, notwithstanding the celebration of powerful womanhood and of female artistic talents typical of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, seems to be in line with the spirit of an age when, as Elaine Showalter underlines, echoing Michael Donnelly's positions in *Managing the Mind* (1983), 'Ophelia became the prototype not only of the deranged woman in Victorian literature and art but also of the young female asylums patients'. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 90.

Also, when Seacole relates about local populations she offers a highly problematized vision. Unlike her two important predecessors, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) and Elizabeth Craven (1750-1828),<sup>13</sup> who both wrote about countries of the then Ottoman Empire, she alludes – albeit not always explicitly – to the power relations active in the Crimean area, thus showing a high political sensibility which both Montagu's and Craven's works seem to lack. She writes: 'They robbed us, the Turks, and one another; but a stronger hand was sometimes laid on them. The Turk, however, was sure to be the victim, let who might be the oppressor' (p. 105).

The formal dimension of the work, predominantly interspersed with dialogical passages, seems to be in line with the cultural issues examined. Indeed, one of the major characteristics of Seacole's narrative is that, throughout the textual space, the authorial persona always engages the reader in what appears to be a continuous dialogical exchange as the recourse to the second person singular pronouns highlights: 'If *you* had told me that the time would soon come when I should remember this sorrow calmly, I should not have believed it possible: and yet it was so' (p. 6). Further on, Seacole writes 'I was glad enough to go on shore, as *you* may imagine' (p. 16, emphasis added). If we consider that Seacole's reading public would be mainly English, such a continuous involvement of the reader could be interpreted as a search of consent in the context of Seacole's complex (self-)fashioning, which also includes an explicit socio-cultural identification as an English citizen. This dynamic of national self-appropriation can be found, in particular, in one of the headings of Chapter XI which reads 'I become an English schoolmistress abroad' (p. 102).

The second printing of the work, following the initial one by James Blackwood in 1857, indicates that its reception in the context of imperial England was most favourable. This was also due to Seacole's fame to which William H. Russell, the war correspondent of the *Times*, had greatly contributed during the conflict. The editorial success of the work as well as the institution in 1867 of the Seacole's Fund, established to provide the war 'veteran' with a pension, and Seacole's well-off acquaintances (including the Prince of Wales himself) also urge contemporary critics

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the different cultural perspectives informing Montagu's and Craven's work, structured around both gender and 'race' as analytic categories, see Efterpi Mitsi, 'Lady Elizabeth Craven's Letters from Athens and the Female Picturesque,' in *Women Writing Greece: Essays on Hellenism, Orientalism and Travel*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Efterpi Mitsi (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 19-37.

to take into account all possible forms of negotiation, complicity, resistance and mutual acknowledgement (if only on a private level) between colonized subjectivities and the British hegemonic groups, rather than postulating a clear-cut Manichean opposition between the two, which, however, kept pervading official discourses.

If Seacole's work is constructed around the motif of cultural hybridity,<sup>14</sup> in Shaw's prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* the deconstruction of the colonial paradigm is pushed even further. Authored by a white, male Irish playwright originally coming from the domestic 'margins' of the imperial territory, it was published seventy-five years after the publication of Seacole's life story, when Britain still exerted its control over the Empire. In the meantime, in the cultural field the Modernist revolution, a real watershed in terms of forms and thematic motifs, had taken place. And as I shall attempt to demonstrate, the multiplicity of time levels and voices as well as the pivotal role attributed to the female leading character testify to the influence of Modernism on Shaw's tale. In his *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2005), Pericles Lewis argues that 'Shaw seems more at home among the Edwardians like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells, than the modernists T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf'.<sup>15</sup> However, I contend that although the Shavian tale cannot be classified as a modernist work *tout court*, modernist tenets – especially those concerning an innovative representation of identity – can be found in its textual space. My position mainly draws on Astradur Eysteinnsson's view of Modernism as 'a historically explosive paradigm'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the scholar argues that 'modernism can be seen as the negative other of capitalist-bourgeois ideology and of the ideological space of social harmony demarcated for the bourgeois subject',<sup>17</sup> thus underlining the rethinking of traditional subjectivities and of the concomitant social order which modernist literature introduced. When we consider Shaw's social commitment, his active involvement in the reformist action of the Fabian Society and his support of William Archer's introduction of Henrik Ibsen's revolutionary theatre – with its new female characterizations – in

<sup>14</sup> For the notion of hybridity in Seacole's work, see Jessica Howell, 'Mrs. Seacole Prescribes Hybridity: Constitutional and Maternal Rhetoric in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38, 1 (2010): pp. 107-25.

<sup>15</sup> Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Eysteinnsson, p. 37.

England, the hypothesis that Modernist new symbolic paradigms might have influenced his later production proves to be more plausible than not.

The protagonist of Shaw's tale, a mission-educated young black woman, is an innovative character from the very inception of the story. Unlike any other female colonized character delineated by contemporary white writers, she sets off for a voyage across an unspecified African forest on her own in order to find God, taking with her a Bible as her only guide.<sup>18</sup> Since her journey becomes an occasion for the girl to speculate on both religious and philosophical issues, it enables the symbolic disarticulation of the stereotypical nexus between blackness and savagery.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously – as I shall demonstrate – her irony-pervaded voyage also becomes a textual space in which European colonialism as well as gendered cultural practices openly come under attack. Her displacement across an unspecified – and, consequently, unidentifiable – African space peopled by human beings as well as human-like animals implies a series of displacements in time. In so doing, it recalls – and simultaneously deconstructs – one of the major tropes at the basis of most Victorian colonial travel writing and official discourse, a trope that McClintock has called 'anachronistic space'.<sup>20</sup> In the scholar's words this construction, elaborated by European hegemonic groups, 'reached full authority as an administrative and regulatory technology in the late Victorian era [...] Within this trope the agency of women, the colonized and the industrial working class are disavowed and projected onto anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity'.<sup>21</sup> However, in the case of the black girl, her journey across the African space follows an opposite temporal direction as it implies – due to her encounters with characters belonging to or allegorically signifying different historical eras – the crossing of multiple time levels unfolding from the past to the pres-

<sup>18</sup> Readers may only assume that the forest in question is a South African one since, in the original afterword to the tale, Shaw reveals that he wrote it in the winter of 1932 in the South African city of Knysna, where he stayed five weeks due to an accident occurred to his wife, Charlotte. Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl*, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> In European imagery, the alleged black savagery was sexually connoted. Europeans blamed black people – males in particular – for degenerate sexual appetites. As Margaret Strobel notes, in the colonies the emergence of this fear corresponded to an increased perception of imperial vulnerability. In her words, 'collective sexual hysteria swept South Africa with fears of a Black Peril in 1893, 1906-1908, and 1912-13, coinciding with economic depression'. See Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> McClintock, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> McClintock, p. 40.

ent rather than from the historical present to an artificially constructed primitive past as the one referred to by McClintock. Moreover, in such a process, hegemonic cultural tenets – mostly Western – are symbolically projected onto the African space and come under the severe scrutiny of a young black female observer, ready to detect and stigmatize their inherent contradictions and inferiorizing meanings.

Constructed as it is around dialogues and marked by sarcastic undertones, the textual fabric of the tale is imbued with philosophical, religious and scientific speculations. Indeed, the protagonist encounters various characters – both men and women – who act as the boastful embodiments of cultural eras, philosophical currents and social practices. In this context, for example, through the depiction of would-be god-like characters, the far-stretched extremes of the Christian as well as the Islamic creeds are portrayed as ridiculous, thus becoming the real objects of the black girl's contempt. This explains why the volume caused disquiet among Christian circles and why in Ireland in 1933 the Censorship Board even banned it on the grounds of its being 'indecent'.<sup>22</sup>

Simultaneously, the respective embodiments of the self-proclaimed gods seem to undergo a process of museification, which, in spite of its peculiar symbolic outcomes, inevitably recalls the practice of exposing people of African descent in the European imperial metropolises of London and Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> However, interestingly enough, in Shaw's tale *Otherness*, rather than being symbolically associated with the African territory or with people of African origin, is epitomized by traditional beliefs mainly pertaining to western, Judeo-Christian culture, which, as a result, are deprived of their alleged axiological normativity. Thus, in one of the first scenes, the vengeful Old Testament God – typified by the Lord of the Hosts – is openly criticized and its manifest irrationality

<sup>22</sup> See Brad Kent, 'The Banning of George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* and the Decline of the Irish Academy of Letters,' *Irish University Review* 38, 2 (2008): pp. 274-91.

<sup>23</sup> A case in point is Sarah Baartman's tragic life experience, an extreme example of what I would call 'living museology'. Indeed Sarah (1789-1815), a woman of the Khoikhoi group, probably suffering from steatopygia, was exposed in London as well as in Paris (here, in particular, in conditions closely resembling slavery) in the context of freak shows due to her allegedly abnormal physical characteristics. The latter, in turn, caused her to be iconographically inferiorized as the quintessential example of black female sexual primitivism in the realm of the contemporary pseudo-scientific discourse of medicine. In this respect, Gilman, who explicitly underlines the role of nineteenth-century medicine in structuring the prevailing, perceived categorization of the world, observes that 'Sarah Baartman's sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century' (Gilman, p. 216).

becomes synonymous with theoretical fallacy (read: uselessness). As in a parable, this is visualized when those pages of the young black girl's Bible corresponding to the Old Testament revert to dust after she has deconstructed the assumptions of the Lord of the Hosts through her powerful reasoning: 'But whether the ants had got at it, or, being a very old book, it had perished by natural decay, all the early pages had crumbled to dust which blew away when she opened it'.<sup>24</sup> Such a challenging axiological reversal also implies a symbolic reframing of the colonizer/colonized couple whose theoretical validity, within the racialized discourse of imperialism, presupposes, on the contrary, a naturalized relation of power between its two poles. Referring to the imperialist discursive practice of signifying difference, Stuart Hall maintains that

typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing 'difference'. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification and change. But if they are natural [...] then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure'.<sup>25</sup>

Shaw's critique is also unmistakably addressed to the cultural control exercised on the local populations through the colonizers' manipulative preaching of the Christian doctrine among the young African generations. This can be inferred from his initial portrait of the woman who runs the mission in which the black girl had been educated. In this respect, Leon Hugo remarks that 'what bothered Shaw was the effect of such teaching on Africans, for, as he saw the situation, the consequence would be to graft falsehood presented as divine truth on young souls before their potential for a healthy apperception of the truly divine had had a chance to be realized. This, to him, was an effrontery that could not be brooked – the spiritual rape of innocence, no matter if performed with the best of intentions'.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (London: Constable, 1932), p. 11. From now on, the page numbers of Shaw's tale will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the Other', in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), p. 234 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>26</sup> Leon Hugo, *Bernard Shaw's The Black Girl in Search of God: The Story Behind the Story* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 134.



If, on the one hand, the black girl's journey ends up casting light onto the primitivism of Western civilization and its uncritical acceptance of some of the conventions of Christian thought, a similarly powerful critique is addressed to Islamic cultural practices. This, in turn, testifies to gender issues being the major thematic threads of the work, as demonstrated by the girl's open attack to polygamy and her stigmatization of the gender unbalance it implies. When talking to a character named 'the Arab', the black girl poignantly asks him, 'If it is as you say, God must have created Woman because He found Man insufficient. By what right do you demand fifty wives and condemn each of them to one husband?' (p. 50). And, later on, she insists, 'How is she to know your value unless she has known fifty men to compare with you?' (p. 51).

Her robust awareness of gender relations makes the black girl parallel, in Andrew Sanders's words, the 'men-mastering, no-nonsense, strong-willed women that [Shaw] created',<sup>27</sup> following Ibsen's influence. It is no surprise that in his 1913 preface to *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw condemns the patriarchal attitude of Western men since, in his view, 'in killing women's souls they had killed their own'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in line with the black girl's gender self-awareness, one of the distinctive traits of her portrait is her use of the knobkerry, a detail that cannot be taken for granted as the Afro-American author, Carter G. Woodson, had suggested as early as 1935. In his 'Some Attitudes in English Literature', while dismissing Charles Herbert Maxwell's reply to Shaw's tale as 'a modest companion', he underlines Shaw's girl's use of such a stick as peculiar:

Charles Herbert Maxwell wrote in 1933 a reply entitled *Adventures of the White Girl in Her Search for God*, in which he inserts a note, 'Let not the reader think it strange that the White Girl should carry a "niblick." To anyone acquainted with things African, this is far less extraordinary than that a Bantu Girl should carry a "knobkerry," as happens in Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*'.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, if, on the one hand, the young woman's iconoclastic attack – metonymically conveyed by her knobkerry – is directed against

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 478.

<sup>28</sup> George Bernard Shaw, 'Preface: 1913', in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano, 1922), p. xii.

<sup>29</sup> Carter G. Woodson, 'Some Attitudes in English Literature,' *The Journal of Negro History* 20, 1 (1935): p. 85.

the traditional hegemonic constructions pertaining to religious thought, to imperialist discourses as well as to the patriarchal system, it is also true that her character displays a profound consciousness of complex power relations within which gender and 'race' inextricably interweave. Consequently, this seems to anticipate, on a narrative level, some of the theoretical issues Black feminists would pose nearly four decades later, between the late Seventies and the early Eighties.

If examined in the light of such an interpretative perspective, where multiple levels of inferiorization interact, Seacole's work too proves to be imbued with a specific condemnation of unbalanced power relations between women of different ethnic backgrounds. When Seacole tries to be recruited as part of Florence Nightingale's nurses, she clearly perceives that the refusal of her application is due to socio-political reasons having to do with her ethnic belonging: 'Once again I tried, and I had an interview this time with one of Miss Nightingale's companions. She gave me the same reply, and I read in her face that had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it' (p. 79). However, after reading the passage from which this crucial exchange is taken, one has the impression that Seacole's stigmatization of its inherent race-biased contradictions is not explicit as mostly confined within the boundaries of a private interethnic negotiation between two women. By contrast, in Shaw's tale, the ironic altercation between the black girl and Miss Fitzjones, one of the women in the white group she meets along her journey, comes immediately after the black girl's outspoken condemnation of the political as well as economic subordination of the colonized determined by western imperialism. In her words,

The most wonderful things you have are your guns. It must be easier to find God than to find out how to make guns. But you do not care for God: you care for nothing but guns. You use your guns to make slaves of us. Then, because you are too lazy to shoot, you put the guns into our hands and teach us to shoot for you. [...] But nothing will satisfy your greed. You work generations of us to death until you have each of you more than a hundred of us could eat or spend, and yet you go on forcing us to work harder and harder and longer and longer for less and less food and clothing (p. 39).

Following the specific passage in which the black girl has just openly blamed the Europeans for being the true 'heathens and savages' since, as perpetrators of colonial violence, they deprive the colonized of their

self-determination, the white woman's reaction is extremely revealing of the mechanisms whereby racial imbalances further create levels of conflict among and between women:

'Look!' cried the first lady. 'She is upsetting the men. I told you she would. They have been listening to her seditious rot. Look at their eyes. They are dangerous. I shall put a bullet through her if none of you men will.'

And the lady actually drew a revolver, she was so frightened (p. 41).

Significantly, Miss Fitzjones's abrupt outburst – 'I told you she would' – reveals that, in her perception, the black girl is entrapped in the stereotypical construction of the Other to which the white woman relates, thus interposing the filter of the Manichaeian imperialist rhetoric between the young woman and herself. As a result, this not only prevents her from creating authentic gender counter-alliances across the racial divide, but also leads her to become a potential vehicle for colonial practices inspired by violence. The cultural clash between the black girl and Miss Fitzjones explores – albeit in caricatural terms – the impossibility for a white woman and a black one in the African colonial context of the 1930s to mirror each other. Almost fifty years later, in 1979, this issue was raised theoretically by Audre Lorde who, in her founding essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', intervened in the feminist debate of the time emphasizing the pervasiveness, within its boundaries, of a dominant white feminist discourse. Consequently, the black theorist urged women not only to acquire a deep awareness of the multiple subject positions existing in the female sphere, but also to give them an adequate voice in order to articulate effective counter-discourses in the context of the political implementation of forms of interdependence, so as not to replicate patriarchal power relations:

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. [...] Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom that allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.<sup>30</sup>

A formally over-determined text, in which the generic features of travel narrative, *Bildungsroman* and satirical pamphlet productively in-

<sup>30</sup> Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), p. 111.

tersect, Shaw's tale is also pervaded by multiple oppositional thematic motifs. Against this background, its conventional heteronormative ending – the black girl ends up interrupting her search for God and marrying an initially reluctant Irish man – may seem, at least at first sight, to act as a narrative anti-climax mostly due to its seeming conformity to a middle-class family model. In reality, the fictional construction of the black girl's domestic environment is far from being pacifying. Albeit marked by ironic undertones, the union between the two – in which the Irishman is literally forced to take the young woman as his wife – implies a reversal of the roles within the traditional white man/black woman couple in the colonial context: more precisely, it foregrounds a representational overturning of the conventional imperialist iconography which saw the black woman subordinate to the white man's predatory act directed towards the colonial land and the colonized female body.

The black girl and the Irishman's household and garden are to be viewed as the symbolic representation of social(ist) commitment. It is no coincidence that the initial owner of the place, the old gentleman, a figuration of the French philosopher Voltaire, gives the black girl hospitality and convincingly suggests she should interrupt her search and opt for active participation in the (metaphorical) gardening. As the tale unfolds, onto this micro-context is projected the progressive replacing (evolution?) of Voltairean rationalism by the Shavian socialist ideal of egalitarian cooperation for the advancement of society exemplified by a renewed metaphorical cultivation of potatoes introduced by the Irishman.

In line with such deconstructive identity models, the harmony of the final domestic scene seems to further contradict a widespread imperialist discourse (thus revealing its inherent constructedness) that blamed mixed unions for the progressive weakening of the white group due to the alleged process of 'going native' to which white people might yield in the context of a most dreaded assimilation to local people in the colonial space. If, from the very beginning of the work, the authorial aim was primarily that of disavowing false religious beliefs, once the reading has been completed, the Shavian tale reveals a more complex thematic fabric: indeed, it proves to be an act of accusation against an entire civilization which, brandishing the ideological weapon of the white man's burden, had activated, for centuries, a military control system supported by the cultural process of a systematic inferiorization of the Other. Furthermore, as the narrative develops, a robust sensitivity to gender issues can

be outlined, which further contributes to reinforcing the counter-discourse of the text.

The point to note here is that the oppositional thematic motif of the text is not contradicted at the end of the story when the young black woman, having interrupted her search for God (at least on a material level) is portrayed taking care of her children and carrying out daily family duties. Indeed, it should be considered that her family life is, after all, the result of her self-determination. Hugo observes that she is 'a "champion" endowed with heroic qualities: moral courage, physical and mental strength, good looks, quick-wittedness, a healthy reserve of skepticism, and tons of common sense'.<sup>31</sup> The young woman's journey has represented, for the reader, a real literary quest resulting in a redefinition of Otherness, traditionally represented by the black group, and by black women in particular. Therefore, Shaw's work is to be interpreted as a literary space within whose productive blurring of generic conventions a renewed trope of travel and, consequently, an equally revised travel narrative allow to deconstruct – at least on an imaginative level – Western hegemonic axiological systems and interrupt racialized circuits of knowledge.

Moreover, due to the relational nature of meanings, in deconstructing the traditional racist association between blackness and the symbolic axis of Nature (as opposed to Culture) and morally connoted deviance, not only does Shaw activate a reconfiguration of ethnic Otherness but he also offers a redefinition of Western and, within it, British identity. And if Seacole had operated an identity self-fashioning from a perspective which, at least initially, positioned itself in the productive space of cultural inbetweenness, similarly Shaw's iconoclastic meaning production originates from a perspective that is internal to British civilization and, at the same time, filtered by a gaze reminiscent of the original complex positioning on the 'domestic' (read: Irish) margins of the empire.

In conclusion, Seacole's and Shaw's works – notwithstanding their different contexts of production and peculiar formal solutions – are to be seen as oppositional literary products in which a reinterpreted trope of travel, together with the generic porosity marking both texts, helps deconstruct Western hegemonic representational practices. Indeed, by contesting traditional areas of identity representation, Seacole and Shaw

<sup>31</sup> Hugo, p. 142.

activate an imaginative reconfiguration of both ethnic difference and Britishness. Moreover, if in the traditional white/black binary couple the pervasive stereotype of a homogenized and pathologized black woman used to represent the most inferiorized 'layer' of the black pole, in their works, on the contrary, this construct is progressively reversed. As a result, not only is the black woman given a voice, but also her speculative faculty is foregrounded. This implies for the colonial Other *par excellence* being almost re-cast into a black New Woman, which, in turn, programmatically creates symbolic possibilities of political transformation.

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Getting out of the box is a way for innovative writers across the ages not simply to jettison their given cultural and national tools but to combine them inventively. The present book contains a revised selection of the literature and cultural studies papers given at the XXIX AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) Conference, which was held at the University of Padova in September 2019. It aims to detect the many ways in which cultures negotiate their differences and eventually revise their boundaries: epistemological shifts are shown thanks to the changes in literary tastes and in conventions. In/out, the centre of the Empire and its (ex-)colonies, whiteness and blackness, man and woman, are among the main twin boxes that get revised and extrapolated. Not one single box is left untouched: fixed notions of genre, and of gender as well, are here discussed with a keen attention to the many moments where the writers' ambivalence causes a shift in literary creation.

ISBN 978-88-6938-257-4



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30,00 €